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WEEPING FERRY

7621

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

MARGARET L. WOODS

AUTHOR OF 'A VILLAGE TRAGEDY' ETC.

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WEEPING FERRY

PROLOGUE

Elisabeth Vyne was making bread, and Tryphena Dangerfield sat on the corner of the table, swinging her legs in all the short-skirted freedom of fourteen. Mrs. Filkins stood with her foot on the fender, drying her petticoat at the fire, which burned brightly on the hearthstone, under the wide chimney, and meditatively munching a bit of her sister-in-law's cake. It was past noon, and the white mist which in the early morning clings to the surface of the river and the low meadows, now floated diaphanous in the air, lending a softness to the sunshine and a deeper purple to the distance. The willows and great elm-trees were little by little exchanging the cold bluish greens which they put

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on at the first approach of autumn, for the warm yellows of mid October, and the sunflowers in the Manor garden had rents in their big leaves, though they held their heads as high as ever. The fuchsia bush and the blue Michaelmas daisies were still in flower, and the air was full of the scent of mignonette, which never smells so sweet as in the autumn sunshine.

The path by which the flowers grew was paved. It started from a gateway with squared piers, which had once been surmounted by two big stone balls. Only one now remained in its place; the other lay in the field outside, half overgrown with grass. A short flight of steps brought the path down to the level of the house, and to the left a grassy walk led up to a broad green terrace, surrounded by a yew hedge.

The grey Manor House with its stone mullions and blazoned porch, the garden with its last remnants of formality, suggested visions of ladies in jewels and brocade, and cavaliers with delicate hands clapt to ready sword-hilts. But very likely it had been neglected almost ever since it was made,

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and the Bamptons whose arms decorated the porch had been for the most part homely folk, seldom better educated, and on a week-day scarcely better dressed than Elisabeth Vyne, who now made bread in their place.

'Mrs. Vyne,' said Tryphena imperiously.

Elisabeth measured the dough on the board with her eye and pulled a bit off before she replied:

'Yes, Miss Tryphena.'

'Why is blue cheese blue?'

Mrs. Vyne deposited the superfluous dough in the big red pan at her side, and powdered the remainder with flour. Then she answered mildly:

'Some folks do say it's the stuff that's put in it.'

'But you don't put stuff in yours, do you?'

'Oh dear, no, Miss,' and Mrs. Vyne smiled.

'Then why is it blue?'

Mrs. Vyne passed the rolling-pin over the dough several times.

'Other folks say it's the land,' she replied at length, with the same mild impartiality.

'But you made it the same when you were at the Meades, didn't you? So what makes it blue?'

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'There's folks do say 'tis the season of the year,' returned Mrs. Vyne, carefully shaping the two balls of her loaf; then clapping the smaller one firmly on to the larger, she added with sudden frank contempt, 'But they none of 'em knows what they're talkin' about.'

'Then what's the real reason?' asked Tryphena, eagerly.

Elisabeth looked meditatively at the dough in her pan. 'There's just enough for one more—old Catharine's,' she observed. 'Wouldn't you like to make old Catharine's little loaf, Miss Tryphena?'

'Yes, I should awfully, Mrs. Vyne. But do tell me what you think yourself about the cheese.'

'I do think 'tis very good to eat with bread, Miss,' returned Elisabeth placidly, 'and if I don't make haste to get oven hot, we shall have none to eat it with. But there! I'd quite forgot you wanted to see me make Spotted Dick. I'll run and get some currants directly, that I will.'

And she left the room with a step that was still light, in spite of her thick-set figure and

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fifty odd years. Mrs. Filkins was smiling to herself.

'You won't get nothing out of Lizzie she ain't got a mind to tell you, Miss,' she said. 'Lor'! She's as close as the grave, she is!'

Mrs. Filkins looked like a Jewess, but she was an Englishwoman, and Thomas Vyne's sister. She was a tall woman with a yellow skin, marked features, and a quantity of oily-looking dark hair, dressed in a large chignon and surmounted by a large comb. The sisters-in-law were as unlike as possible. Elisabeth Vyne's hair was light brown, she was fair-skinned and blue-eyed and talked in the high-pitched West Country voice, while Mrs. Filkins spoke with the Cockney vulgarity of the Midlands.

'I call it nonsense to make a mystery about cheese,' pouted Tryphena, chagrined.

'I don't hold with answering little gals' questions myself,' returned Mrs. Filkins. 'There's no end to 'em if once you begin. But 'Lisabeth's awful close about everything. She don't seem to want sympathy the same as I do.' And Mrs.

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Filkins, who had a liver which she mistook for a heart, sighed and slowly shook her large jet earrings. 'It's surprising 'ow cheerful she is, although she's 'ad her troubles, like the rest of us. Tom's not always been steady, and she've lost the two children that were her favourites, Jim and Bessie. Well, people's 'earts are made different! You could have knocked me down with a feather when I 'eard poor Bessie was dead. A young girl like that took off so sudden. But 'Lisabeth 'ardly said a word about it, and sent an extry lot of butter to the shop the same week.'

Here Mrs. Vyne came back with the currants, and Mrs. Filkins continued, addressing her:

'I was just saying to Miss Tryphena what a light 'eart you have, Lizzie; always keeping 'appy through all your troubles. *So* different from me.'

'Well, I've got plenty of work to do, Miss; that's where it is; and I enjoy my work too. See now, you mix a few currants and some sugar with the dough, and that do make the Spotted Dick.'

'*So* different from me,' repeated Mrs. Filkins, with lugubrious pride. 'Now I'm that low-sperrited

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some days I can sit down and cry and cry for no reason whatever. My feelings always 'ave been so acute.'

'You couldn't afford it if you was me,' replied Elisabeth, without any intention of sarcasm, but making a statement of fact.

'I am sure I took on more about that child I was going to adopt, dying than you did about Bessie. It quite haffected my appetite. But then you've got other children, and all doing well.'

'Yes, they be all doing well,' repeated her sister-in-law slowly. 'Now, Miss, do you make old Catharine's loaf nicely, for she be fine and particular, I can tell you. There she is, bringing clay to close up oven door; but she won't come in when visitors are here, and she'll scold me, that she will, for having them the day she's about.'

'She doesn't mind me,' replied Tryphena, beginning to make up the remains of the dough into a small loaf, 'but I'm awfully afraid of her. She's a regular old witch, muttering spells in unknown tongues.' A little figure, infinitely withered and dwindled yet still upright, had come slowly down

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the steps to the porch, carrying a pail, and now a small white face was peering at the window. Half a century ago the face had been pretty, but now it was wrinkled and shrunken and curiously blanched, uuder the crisp hair of a bright yellow colour, flecked with white, which covered the strange little head.

'I can't think why you have her about,' said Mrs. Filkins; 'she's a deal too old to be of use.'

Mrs Vyne had stepped to the window and was moving her lips, with a grotesque exaggeration of the movements of speech. Old Catharine moved hers in reply, and strange sounds, low mutterings unexpectedly and momentarily breaking out into loud hoarse utterance, proceeded from them.

'Ugh! She's horrid!' exclaimed Tryphena. 'Do you understand her, Mrs. Vyne?'

'I don't understand all she do say, poor thing; only a few words of it. She's going to put clay down outside.'

Elisabeth opened the door of the great oven in the wall. There were still some embers of the wood with which it had been heated, lying on its floor,

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and sending a red glow into its cavernous depths.

'What a splendid oven!' exclaimed Tryphena. 'I should like to get into it and be baked.'

'You wouldn't like to be plastered up so as you couldn't get out,' replied Mrs. Vyne, shovelling out the embers. 'That's what we have to do with the bread, and a nasty job too. I've spoken to landlord about it times, but there! men is all the same, be they high or low. They think our work does itself, for all the world like the grass a-growing.'

Mrs. Filkins shook her head and sighed an inarticulate Amen.

'That reminds me,' she said,' I must go back and see how that girl's cooked the dinner. We've got Percy Hicks and his wife coming in. She ain't much to look at, but he seems pleased enough! Have you seen her yet, Lizzie?'

'No,' answered Elisabeth. 'I haven't seen much of him this long while.'

Mrs. Filkins put on her hat and beaded mantle. While doing so, she exclaimed:

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'Why, 'Lisabeth, you've got another photo of Milly! I wonder she was taken in that nurse's dress, for all the world like a servant! I heard from a friend of mine at Swindon, as that invalid lady she lives with, treats her pretty near like a daughter. And Thomas was telling me too, how well Tom and Jacob are doing in New Zealand, and Jacob going to be married now. It's no wonder you don't fret over your losses, when the children you've got left are doin' so well.'

'You've got no children of your own, Harriet, or you wouldn't talk sich nonsense,' replied Elisabeth, with a slight compression of the lips.

'No, I've not,' returned Mrs. Filkins; 'I do believe it's that weighs on my mind and makes me so low-sperrited, though I can't always think of the reason. It's wonderfnl the luck you've had with your children. All of 'em a comfort to you, for that Jim and Bessie were to the last. Yes, I do think you've got reason to be thankful, Lizzie; there's many 'as 'ad worse trials nor you've 'ad.'

So, full of vicarious contentment, Mrs. Filkins made her adieux affably and departed.

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Elisabeth remained silent, wiping her clayey hands on her clean apron. The lines on her forehead had deepened, her mouth was pinched as though with pain, and her blue eyes had a fixed far-away look in them. Tryphena observed it.

'How stupid of Mrs. Filkins to talk as though you didn't mind about things!' she exclaimed. 'I know you do really, Mrs. Vyne, though you don't go howling about, the same as she would.'

'I dare say I'm not so thankful as I should be for the ones that I've still got, Miss,' Elisabeth answered slowly, and without moving. 'A mother did ought to love all her children the same, and mine are good children. Only Milly, she do hardly ever come to see us, and she have often wrote as though I should have given her a better education. But we've always been poor working folk, and I gave her the best I could, though like enough she do feel it a poor un now she's living among ladies. Us must seem rough to her when she do come home.'

And Mrs. Vyne bent over the hearth and

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arranged the sticks on it, perhaps to hide some moisture in her eyes.

'Have Tom and Jacob got grand too?' asked Tryphena.

'I don't know about grand, Miss, they're good boys, and would give me anything I asked for—but there! what a long way off they are! Then Tom's been married this five years and got a little family, and Jacob's going to be married now. It's only natural as they should be thinking mostly about their own affairs. And—well, a mother I know oughtn't to have no favourites, but somehow Jim did seem such a friend to I.'

'I think I remember Jim, Mrs. Vyne. Wasn't he fair like you, with a jolly sort of face?'

A light flickered back into Elisabeth's eyes. She opened a workbox which stood on the window-seat behind the blue check curtain, and took a photograph out of a satin pocket, handling it carefully lest she should soil it.

'That's him, Miss,' she said, passing it to Tryphena. 'He wer drowned six years ago, come the fifteenth of November.'

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'I thought no one knew what became of his ship,' returned Tryphena. 'Perhaps he's still alive.'

Elisabeth shook her head gravely, and began rinsing her hands in a basin of water.

'You'd think me silly-like, Miss, if I was to tell you how I do know it. He was drowned on the fifteenth of November, about three o'clock in the morning, by our time.'

'O do tell me how you know!' cried Tryphena.

Perhaps Mrs. Vyne felt the need of expansion and sympathy which sometimes comes irresistibly upon even the most reserved women; for after a pause, she continued:

'You see, Miss, Jim he always wer set on going to sea. He did use to say as he'd give it up if his mother forbid him formal: but seeing the boy so set upon it, Miss, I hadn't the heart to do so—and many's the time I've been sorry for it since. But things do happen as it is God's will they should, and 'tis little use our fancyin' we might ha' set our will against Hisen, and made 'em fall out otherwise.'

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Elisabeth rested her hands on each side the rim of the basin and looked straight before her, with absent eyes. 'At first everything did seem to go well,' she went on. 'He was a rare favourite aboard ship, yet as stiddy a chap as you could find. He come back home after every v'yage he made, and brought me presents—well, you've seen 'em in the glass cupboard in the parlour. The last time he come he was as jolly as ever, but just before he went he seem to turn melancholy like, and he said to me quite sudden: "Mother, the old *Castle*"—that was his ship—"she's a floating coffin." I warr'nt my heart came into my mouth. I begged and prayed un not to sail in her. But Jim, he said, "I'd rather go to Old Davey with a good Cap'n like ours than sail in a Liner with many a one. Only mother"—and he spoke it very solemn—"if anything do happen to me, and it's the will of God that I should do so, I'll let you know how 'tis with me. I promise you that." Well, you can fancy, Miss, I was put about. I didn't say much to Father or anyone, but I kept promising myself that if Jim came back safe that time, he should never sail in

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the *Dover Castle* again. We heard from him from Buenos Ayres saying all was well, and he hoped to spend Christmas with us, and then—O Miss, wasn't it strange, when he'd promised it to me, that he should come to Father and not to me at all?'

The mother's voice complained and her eyes filled with tears.

'Did Mr. Vyne see his ghost?' asked Tryphena with breathless interest.

'I suppose it warn't his fault, poor boy,' continued Elisabeth. 'I do sleep so dreadful sound and never was one for dreams. But Father he do often dream, and that night he screamed so loud in his sleep he woke me up. I asked un whatever was the matter, for he was trembling and all of a sweat, and he told me his dream. He thought he was on something, he didn't rightly know if it wer a rock or what, in the midst of a great heap of water, that was all of a foam and rushing past him like a mill-race. He knew it was night, yet he could see. And he saw the water bringing sommat along at a great rate, and when it came near he saw Jim's face looking up at him out of water, with a scared

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sort of look. Then father ran and ran along by the side of the water, trying to catch hold of un, but he couldn't do it. And the poor chap says to him: "It's no use, Father—I'm a dead man. Give my love to Mother." Then Father saw his face getting quite peaceful like, but the water that wer rushing along all the time carr'd un right away, and Father couldn't see un no more. So he begun to screech and holler and woke me up. When he told me his dream, I knew as well as I do now that I should never see Jim again. No ship ever sighted the *Dover Castle* after she left the Plate River on the tenth of November, but they knowed she must have run into foul weather before she had been a week at sea.'

There was a silence. Then, putting away the photograph in the workbox, Mrs. Vyne repeated wistfully:

'It was strange his coming to Father and not to me, for it was me he promised.'

'It was a strange thing altogether,' said Tryphena, awe-struck. Then lowering her voice still further: 'But it was you that heard the Weeping Lady at

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the Ferry before poor Bessie died—and so did I. I shall always'—this with satisfaction—'be able to say I've heard a ghost.'

Elisabeth seemed about to answer, then said nothing. Her face changed, as though the gates of her heart, which had been momentarily set wide, had been closed again and locked.

'Do you keep Bessie's photograph in that box too?' asked Tryphena, after some hesitation.

'No, Miss,' Elisabeth answered shortly, 'I don't.' Then she glanced at the clock. 'Why it's gone one! Father'll be wanting his dinner.'

'And I shall be late for lunch again!' screamed Tryphena. 'O, what will papa say? Goodbye, Mrs. Vyne.' She pulled open the door, fled up the steps; and after a brief struggle with the rusty garden-gate, disappeared into the field beyond.

I

Bessie was the youngest and handsomest of Mrs. Vyne's handsome children. She liked dairy-work, and had a cool hand for butter, so her mother had

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kept her at home. Mr. Filkins, the grocer at Church Milton, rented the Manor and the pastures appertaining to it, and put in his brother-in-law, or rather his brother-in-law's wife, to manage the dairy. He sold the produce at his shop, to which the gentry for miles round sent for their butter and cheese. So there was plenty for Bessie to do at home; she was content to stay there, and her mother more than content to keep her. Elisabeth Vyne loved her children, especially Jim and Bessie, with the subdued passion of a strong reserved nature which has found no other emotional outlet. Her husband she accepted without complaint, though she was sometimes heard to remark in a cold abstract kind of way, that a woman who could earn a good living for herself, and went and got married, was such a silly that she deserved it. She had been in Squire Meade's service for ten years before she had married his groom, handsome young Thomas Vyne, and for two years after that she had managed their dairy-farm. But Thomas had turned out badly. He drunk and gambled, and finally embezzled his master's money to spend

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it on a girl in the neighbouring village. After this the Meades had been unable to keep the couple in their service, but they had been faithful friends to Elisabeth during the bad years when her husband had been constantly out of place and she had been encumbered with the bearing and rearing of children. Without their timely aid the youngest child would have been born in the workhouse, and the family possessions irretrievably scattered. When Elisabeth had been set free to work, things had gradually mended. During the ten years they had lived at Old Milton, Thomas had been lazy but not particularly ill-behaved. A perception of the fact that his living depended on his wife, may have had something to do with his comparative reformation.

Mrs. Meade's youngest child was three months older than Elisabeth's. It was a son and heir, the more valued because preceded by five daughters. They called him Geoffrey. Now when Geoffrey was twenty-two, and had spent three pleasant years at Oxford, it happened that he came to Old Milton to

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expiate their idleness by a Long Vacation of reading with Mr. Dangerfield, the Rector.

It was an event in Elisabeth's monotonous life when her 'little Missus,' as she still called Mrs. Meade, came to the Manor to take rooms there for Geoffrey and his young friend Owen Smith, and to commend 'Master Geoffrey' to the faithful Elisabeth's particular care. There was little or nothing for the young men to do except read. A few phlegmatic fish lie in the deep pool at Weeping Ferry, just above the Manor, and on summer evenings one or two of the good burgesses of Church Milton may generally be seen standing motionless on the river bank, rod in hand, till the twilight falls. Neither Geoffrey nor his friend cared for this kind of sport. He was not indifferent to the beauties of Nature. He spoke of the mountains in Scotland, where his father sometimes took a shooting, as 'ripping good scenery,' but from Weeping Ferry he wrote home that the river was a fraud and the country hideous. Yet the broad valley, spreading flat between its low boundaries, has a charm and a beauty of its own; the charm of hushed

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solitude, the beauty of a great expanse of sky, which lends an infinite changefulness of colour to the wide pastures, where the flocks feed, and the river winding through them, to the pale plumage of the willows, and heavy masses of the elms, broken by sharp up-springing spires of poplars. Here and there out of some group of trees a homestead or a church tower pushes roof and wall of grey stone, pearl-grey as the light clouds on the distant horizon. Yet despite these hints of human life, all is profoundly still, profoundly solitary. The cattle may stand all day in the water looking at their own reflections, undisturbed by a passing boat. By July the river is overgrown with the great woody stalks and white umbels of water parsley, and fringed with floating beds of forget-me-nots, rosy thickets of loose-strife and ranks of tall spear-headed reeds.

It was at this season that Geoffrey Meade first saw it, and pronounced it 'a fraud.' Yet he and his friend canoed upon it, and for the rest, read, bicycled, attended occasional tennis parties, and took the dulness of the world good-humouredly.

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When Mrs. Meade visited Old Milton it was not only to see the Rector; it was also to see his daughters. She and the Squire had no desire to see their treasured son and heir engaged at twenty-two to some penniless girl from a country parsonage. Her inspection of the three elder Miss Dangerfields was reassuring; and Tryphena was too young to count. The three girls were not only plain, but to a stranger indistinguishable from each other; though each in her secret soul was conscious of some personal point in which she had much the advantage of her sisters. Moreover they were dull and well satisfied with themselves because they were Dangerfields and near cousins of the present Lord Riversham. It was therefore with a mind quite free from matrimonial anxieties on her son's behalf, that Mrs. Meade engaged rooms at Weeping Ferry. She did not happen to see Bessie Vyne, nor would it have troubled her to know that the girl was handsome. For though Geoffrey gave himself up to the enjoyment of living more than his teachers could approve, his enjoyment was of the healthy out-door sort, and no one could be less

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inclined to dally with maidens of low degree. So he and Owen Smith came to the Manor. They were on excellent terms with the Vynes, and doubtless admired Bessie; but their admiration was not enthusiastic, and she was a sensible and also a proud girl, without any desire to attract their attention.

So for a month or more all went on smoothly and monotonously at the Manor. Then on the same day in August both Owen Smith and Mrs. Vyne found themselves obliged to go away: he to his own home and she to a bed in Riversham Hospital.

II

That morning old Catharine was hoeing her patch of garden. Her little knotty hands and thin arms, where the veins showed black through the withered skin, had far more strength left in them than could have been supposed. But she hoed slowly and often stopped to blink her colourless eyes in the sunshine, which fell with a pleasant warmth on the damp little garden, surrounded by

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willows, and glittered on the mingled silver and yellow of her hair.

Old Catharine lived in the grey, tower-like Round House at Weeping Ferry. One tall poplar whispers above it, and about it the distorted willows lean this way and that. She had once a son who was lock-keeper there, but about the time of his death, a railway-company bought up the canal which joins the river at this point, in order to destroy its traffic, and the lock is almost disused. The water trickles through the chinks in the gates, and great burdocks press against them a luxuriance of broad green leaves and massive spikes of pinkish purple blossoms. Yet the gates are solid enough to serve as a foot-bridge over the canal to the meadows and the Vynes' house. The name of Weeping Ferry is very old; older than the tall spire of Church Milton, which has looked far and wide over the valley for five hundred years. Only conjecture finds in it a record of

> forgotten far-off things,
> And fights fought long ago.

The Ferry is haunted, and on winter evenings

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the villagers prefer to pass it in twos and threes on their way home from market, along the raised causeway which runs straight across the water-meadows from the town. The river here divides into two branches. The main one curves away to the right, in the direction of the town; across the other a punt runs on a double rope, connecting the causeway with the tow-path of the canal. It is not only on account of the ghost that the villagers call Weeping Ferry 'an unked place.' Few persons in Old Milton would have confessed to a fear of being 'overlooked'; nevertheless it was sometimes said and oftener hinted that folks Old Catharine took against did not prosper. She was sixty and already nearly stone deaf when she came to Weeping Ferry. People said that thirty years earlier Catharine in fine clothes and yellow ringlets had been seen driving about the country in the bad Squire Tanfield's landau. But it was not this dim and doubtful memory that placed a barrier between her and her neighbours. Chiefly no doubt it was her affliction, her difficulty in apprehending them, still more her own harsh

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confused unmodulated speech, which seemed to have lost its human tone. Besides this, something solitary, cynical and domineering in her temper contributed to give her a sinister reputation. Elisabeth Vyne was her only friend. Elisabeth had once saved her life by nursing her through a severe illness. After this Catharine used to come to the Manor once a week to sew and do odd jobs, for which she would never receive payment in money, though she received it in other ways. She had a jealous love for Elisabeth which she did not extend to her children, least of all to Bessie, her favourite daughter.

Old Catharine's eyes were as good as her hearing was defective, and as she leaned on her hoe and looked along the causeway, she saw Elisabeth coming a long way off. She wondered what had taken Mrs. Vyne to town when it was not a market day. Elisabeth pulled herself across the ferry wearily, and then turned aside to speak to Catharine in her garden. This she not unusually did, but to-day she had something special to say.

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Catharine understood her and she Catharine better than anyone else.

Catharine paused in her hoeing and followed with her eyes the movement of Elisabeth's lips.

'You remember the accident I had with the milk pails a while ago?' asked Elisabeth, after the first greetings.

Catharine nodded.

'Well, doctor he do say I must go into hospital at onest—into hospital.'

Catharine shook her head.

'You—stop—at—'ome,' she croaked.

'Doctor says, no—hospital,' shouted Elisabeth.

The pinched white nostrils of the old woman's delicate little nose became still more pinched with scorn.

'Doctors! Ay, doctors have got to get their living the same as other folks, but if I was you I'd leave 'em to terr'fy the gentry.'

'If it was only Dr. Bates I wouldn't take so much notice,' returned Elisabeth, answering the expression rather than the words, only a few of which she could distinguish. 'It ain't one day

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in ten he's sober. But it was Dr. Thompson, and everyone do seem to put faith in he.'

Catharine was leaning her chin on the top of her hoe. She lifted it just enough to give her jaws full play, and repeated with hoarse distinctness:

'You—stop—at—'ome.'

'And what would become of us all if I was to lose my 'ealth and strength?' asked Elisabeth. 'Listen, Catharine. I want you to go to the Manor every day while I'm away, to help Bessie. Aunt Filkins will be there, but she makes more work nor she does. Aunt Filkins and one young gentleman and Bessie. Do you understand?'

Catharine laughed a suppressed internal laugh that was not pleasant to hear. She put her face up as close as she could to Elisabeth's, and a lifted forefinger besides, to emphasise what she had to say. Then she poured out jumbled sounds quickly in a low hoarse voice, making a kind of fog of utterance, from which only a few words emerged, harsh and toneless.

'Bessie—pretty girl—gentleman. I know

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gentlemen—don't you trust—gentlemen send girls to th' devil—to th' devil. I know gentlemen.'

Elisabeth listened at first in mere bewilderment. Then she understood, and burst into indignant asseverations of Bessie's steadiness, and Mr. Geoffrey's unimpeachable conduct; which indeed might be expected of him, seeing he was own son to Squire Meade and her old Missus. The old woman watched Elisabeth, scraping her chin on the top of the hoe. While she listened thus, after her manner, a smile of the profoundest cynicism just lifted her withered lips and glittered in the recesses of her pale-coloured eyes.

'I—know—gentlemen,' she croaked again.

'What a cure you be, Catharine, to be sure!' exclaimed Elisabeth impatiently; and added to herself as she turned to go: 'I declare she do get quite childish. It's no use to try and explain anything to her.'

Mrs. Vyne continued her homeward way. When she had crossed the lock she looked back, and saw Catharine make a gesture to arrest her. The old woman threw down the hoe on which she had been

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leaning, and ran across the garden with a swiftness extraordinary in one of her age. With the same weird agility she mounted on to the narrow gangway behind the lock gates, and stood there smiling down at Elisabeth, her wild streamers of hair burning orange in the sun against a cool breadth of shadow on a willow behind her.

'All right, Mrs. Vyne,' she said with laboured distinctness, pointing a skinny finger towards the Manor. 'You leave 'er to me—leave 'er to me.'

III

Tryphena was walking along the top of the Manor garden wall. It was not a very high wall, but there was always a chance of falling into a muddy ditch outside it, and this together with the fact that sometimes, as to-day, she had a basket of eggs to carry, made the thing just worth doing. She walked along it deliberately, and after her with equal solemnity, marched Geoffrey Meade. He kept his hands in his pockets and tried to look as though it were exactly the same thing to him as

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walking on the path, though a perceptible sidelong sway of his body betrayed that it was not. When Tryphena came to the gate she got down, but he stepped on to the pier which had lost its ball, and sat there swinging his legs. Thence he contemplated her with an expression as dismal as Nature permitted him to assume; for he had a rosy face, a full, smiling mouth and a cheery blue eye.

'Tryphena, old girl,' he said, sighing noisily, 'you've no idea how beastly slow this place is.'

'Come up to our house and play tennis,' suggested Tryphena. Geoffrey looked blank.

'I don't think I can do that,' he replied with some hesitation. 'You see I've got—I'm reading so awfully hard.'

Tryphena looked him through and through.

'O what a lie!' she said.

He was lighting a cigarette.

'Suppose you stop and talk to me here,' he suggested, when it was alight.

'No; mama told me to come home,' returned Tryphena, who was a good girl, in spite of some appearances to the contrary. Then assuming that

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mature air, which alternated so oddly with the harum-scarum in her deportment: 'I can't think why you don't talk to the Vynes more. Now I find them so very pleasant.'

'Which?' asked Geoffrey. 'Old Vyne.'

'Well, I don't know why people are so disagreeable about Mr. Vyne. He's not half bad when you get to know him. He could tell you a lot you don't know—about horses and things.'

'Could he, by Jove?' And Geoffrey grinned a little; for, like many young men, he liked to consider the horse his 'strong subject.'

'Mrs. Vyne's much nicer, of course,' continued Tryphena. 'But then she's not at home. But there's Bessie. Mama says she's an awfully superior girl. She used to be at our house a lot, and mama taught her singing and things, but papa didn't like it. He said it was putting her above her station.'

'O well—of course there's no use in doing that,' returned Geoffrey, whose own views on social subjects were conservative. Yet he looked with more interest than before at Bessie, as she came round

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the corner of the house, with some eggs in her apron. Mrs. Filkins was behind her.

'Hi, Bessie! Chuck us the eggs,' screamed Tryphena.

Bessie came up the steps smiling, and put the warm brown eggs into her basket. Tryphena scudded away over the field, swinging it as she went; being filled with much faith in the miscellaneous powers of Providence to watch over eggs, children and drunken men.

'Tryphena's been telling me you sing, Bessie,' said Geoffrey.

'Yes, she've got a nice voice,' returned Mrs. Filkins. 'We're all musical in our fam'ly, but Bessie 'ave 'ad the most advantages, because Mrs. Dangerfield taught her music.'

'It was on mother's account,' explained Bessie; 'because my sister Milly did keep on her so about sending me away to be educated. As if poor people like us could afford to do that.'

'Education's rot,' observed Geoffrey. 'There's a lot too much of it nowadays.'

'O, I never could abide my book!' cried Mrs.

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Filkins. 'I'm all for music. Do you sing, Mr. Meade?'

'A little, I'm awfully fond of it.'

'Well, I 'ope you'll honour us with a song sometimes. Bessie and I sing a deal when we're together.'

IV

That evening Geoffrey sat forlornly in the large square parlour at the Manor. Although it was August, the weather was damp, and the mist lay white and chill on the low meadows by the river. The oil lamp threw a strong light on the open volume before him and left the room in shadow about him. His pipe was in his mouth, and his eyes mechanically followed the almost imperceptible smoke ascending from the chimney of the lamp to the low white-washed ceiling, where it spread a blackness in the space between two heavy beams. Without all was not precisely dark, but dreary and formless, and now and then the ivy scraped on the pane of the uncurtained lattice. The sound of clattering plates and opening doors

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had ceased in the kitchen across the way. Mrs. Vyne had been accustomed to keep the kitchen conscientiously quiet of an evening, as she imagined the young gentlemen would greatly dislike anything which disturbed their studies. But now there arose a pleasant sound of voices. Mrs. Filkins and Bessie were singing. The aunt and niece had both a good ear for music, and good voices which harmonised well.

Geoffrey listened.

'By Jove! That's not half bad,' he said to himself.

Presently he put his head in at the kitchen door, rather shyly.

'Do you mind my coming in, Mrs. Filkins?' he asked.

Mrs. Filkins soon dissipated his shyness. She was genial as an acquaintance, though she had drawbacks as a relation. The kitchen was much more cheerful than the parlour. The well-scoured white table was drawn up near the hearth, the plain glass lamp burned brightly on it, Mrs. Filkins sat on one side in a high-backed wooden

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arm-chair with a cushion, and on the other Bessie's dark head was bent over her mending. A black kitten with a red ribbon round its neck sprawled before the fire, clawing the matting with a rasping noise or making a startling dash at some careless foot, swung in time to a tune. From either end of the high, narrow chimney-piece, set with a row of cheap fairings, two large white china dogs, brown-eared and circular-eyed, stared over the heads of the party, with an eternally smiling serenity worthy of Egyptian sphinxes. The dresser, where some old pewter plates and dishes showed bright among common blue ware, even the brown hams hanging from the ceiling, seemed to add to the homely comfort of the room. Geoffrey was soon at home there. He knew an immense number of songs, some broadly comic, some of the characteristically English sort, half-humorous, half-sentimental, some patriotic, and a very few wholly sentimental. The two women, whose own *répertoire* was entirely sentimental and religious, caught up the tunes and joined heartily in the choruses. Sometimes Thomas Vyne, smoking silently in the black

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chimney corner, would take his pipe out of his mouth and swell the sound with a few bass notes.

So the time passed cheerfully enough; and the next evening and the next, and many more in the same way. But sometimes they adjourned to the parlour, where Bessie played dance-music on a crazy piano, while Mr. Vyne took advantage of his wife's absence to spend his evening at the 'Seven Stars,' whence he returned in the sodden condition that was his Nirvâna.

V

When his wife was at home, Thomas Vyne did his half of the churning, for a large modern churn is a heavy machine for a woman to work. But as soon as his daughter was left alone, his share dropped to a quarter. At last he gave it up altogether. For slouching along one day from the back of the house to the front, by the narrow gravel path which ran round it, he happened to look in at the long low casement of the kitchen. Bessie was not churning. She had her sleeves tucked up, and was leaning

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with one strong white arm on the churn, turning a pretty laughing profile away from the window towards the handle. And bent almost double over the handle working with both hands, was Mr. Geoffrey; but as he bent he also lifted towards her a rosy boyish face as laughing as her own. Thomas Vyne retreated from the window to the corner of the house and stood there thinking. His eyelids drooped over his eyes, that were dark like Bessie's, but prominent and dull, and he smiled a slow smile of satisfaction, and also of contemptuous wonder at the folly of a man who could exert himself when he was not obliged. He had been young and handsome once, and the women had been fond of him, but he had never done their work for them; on the contrary, they had worked for him. He went to the stack-yard, and selecting a place where some of last year's hay lay tumbled in the shadow of a tall new rick, he lay down flat on his back, with his corduroy-trousered legs apart, his hands clasped under his head, and his shapeless hat tilted over his eyes. Nothing of his face remained visible except the grizzled unshaven chin and the loose-

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lipped mouth, on which an expression of satisfaction lingered even in his sleep; for his visions were literally golden.

Churning was not the only dairy-work for which Geoffrey developed a taste. At this time of year it was Mrs. Vyne's custom to put a cheese into the press every morning before half-past nine, and Bessie would not have thought of breaking the rule in her absence. Geoffrey discovered it was rather good sport breaking the great smooth curd in the vat with a kind of wooden rake, and hunting the pieces about till they were reduced to the smallest possible fragments. Besides it got him up in the morning, so that he arrived at his tutor's with a comparative punctuality, which at first quite took that worthy man aback.

Once he even helped with the washing. It was a hot day, and Bessie went up to the bowling-green with a basket of wet linen under her arm. The bowling-green was a terrace at the upper end of the garden, surrounded by a yew hedge, and led up to by grass steps. The young men had made a tennis lawn of it when Owen Smith was at the Manor.

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Bessie walked slowly up the turf path, between the gay ranks of rose-coloured and white phloxes, and the sweet grey lavender bushes, full of bloom. She was tired, and glad to breathe the fresh air, after the steamy atmosphere of the wash-house. When she came to the round arch in the hedge of the bowling-green, she paused in surprise; for Geoffrey was lying on the grass in his shabbiest flannels, smoking and reading the newspaper.

'Why, Mr. Geoffrey!' she exclaimed, 'I thought you was going to a garden party this afternoon.'

'So I was,' replied Geoffrey gravely, sitting up and taking the pipe out of his mouth. 'But I've been taken suddenly and seriously unwell.'

'Oh dear!' cried Bessie, opening concerned eyes. 'Would you like the doctor sent for?'

Geoffrey burst out laughing.

'Observe my symptoms,' he said.

He ran and jumped over the tennis net, then hopped back.

Bessie laughed too, but coloured, a little mortified at her own simplicity.

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'What a lot of nonsense you do talk, to be sure, Mr. Geoffrey.'

'Of course I try to humbug people, but I don't succeed, except with you. You're so precious—well—green.'

Bessie smiled and said nothing, for fear she should again say something wrong. There is nothing which differs so much from country to country, and from class to class, as pleasantry, and she was instinctively afraid of indulging in it with Geoffrey. She spread the linen on the broad yew hedge, which had been cut low on the further side of the green.

'Why don't you like going to tennis parties?' she asked.

He jumped up and seized the other end of a sheet which she was trying to shake out.

'Because I prefer hanging out the clothes.'

'I shouldn't, if I was you. I'd a deal sooner play tennis.'

'Depends who you play with. The girls about here seem uncommon dull.'

The sheet was spread out between them and went on to the hedge with a heave.

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'If you find the ladies about here dull, you must find me a lot worse,' said Bessie, after a pause.

'O, come, I say, Bessie! Who's talking nonsense now?'

She untwisted a towel and flapped it noisily.

'Well, I've never been to London or anywhere, and I've not learnt things like ladies. I don't know as I thought much of Milly's talk about education when I was younger, but I often wish now I wasn't so hignorant.'

Geoffrey leaned his back against the hedge and put his hands in his trouser pockets.

'Now, my good girl, don't go on talking that sort of rot! Who, in the name of wonder, cares whether you're ignorant or not? Of course it's all right for ladies to go to school, but afterwards do you suppose anyone cares two straws what they've learnt? It's an awful mistake educating girls as people do now. Men don't like it. They don't marry them. What a man likes is——'

So far Geoffrey's discourse had been abstract, the education of women being a favourite subject for animadversion in the Meade family. But Bessie

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was standing opposite him, drinking in his words, and he broke off.

'Why, Lor' bless me, Bessie,' he exclaimed with a short laugh, 'it's perfectly ridiculous your talking about education and that, when—well, I suppose it's like my imperence to tell you so—but still you must know you're fifty times better looking than any other girl in this blooming country, lady or not.'

The admiration in his look was frank and warm. Bessie turned away slowly and spread a towel on the hedge. His eyes dwelt on the glossy blackness of her plaits and the curves of her creamy cheek and throat. He had never before fully realised her beauty. Neither had she.

VI

The relations of Geoffrey Meade and Bessie continued for a week or two only such as a clear-sighted observer might have called, according to his temper, those of flirtation or of comradeship.

It was at any rate a gossamer idyll, such as the

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least wind of chance might have blown away; to leave no trace on the heart of one at least of the couple. Yet they somewhat modified each other's ideas. Geoffrey, comparing the ungraceful and ungracious scions of the aristocracy at the Rectory, with Bessie Vyne, felt his faith in gentle birth waver. Bessie, by nature a Radical, though controlled by her mother's conservatism, began to doubt whether her mother and Milly knew so much about ladies and gentlemen as she had been used to believe they did. And all the while old Catharine, washing up dishes in the scullery or moving about, duster in hand, kept a pale, suspicious eye on the young people, while they exchanged laughter and talk that to her was silence. She came to envy Bessie with an envy that was almost hate, for her beauty, for the young gentleman's admiration of it, and the chances it would give her. She, deaf old Catharine, had had rich gentlemen after her once; she had had chances too. She reckoned them up in her long broodings, and magnified them, all the splendid chances she had thrown away in her devil-may-care youth, to come at last to this.

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When Elisabeth had been gone three weeks, Catharine was left alone to superintend the young people, for Mrs. Filkins went away.

She had begun to suspect that Mr. Filkins and the niece left in charge of him, were getting along altogether too comfortably without her. Therefore she said that everything was going to sixes and sevens in consequence of her absence, and that Filkins in particular was so much affected by it that he looked as though he were going to have a stroke; which indeed, at his age, as she had often told him, he might confidently expect, and she shouldn't think it right not to be there. So she went back to Church Milton.

The first evening Geoffrey and Bessie were left alone in the house—for Catharine had gone home and Thomas to the 'Seven Stars'—Geoffrey determined to devote himself to his books. He worked conscientiously for more than half an hour. Then, while his bodily eye travelled over the printed page, his mind's eye saw nothing but Bessie sewing alone in the kitchen. At last, when he had read ten pages without having the slightest idea what they

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were about, he remarked to himself that 'Confound it all, it was too absurd!'—If there was no one in the house, so much the better. There would be no one to put a disagreeable complexion on a perfectly innocent friendship.

Yet when he came to the kitchen door he knocked at it hesitatingly, and when Bessie said, 'Come in,' he only put his head in.

'Are you awfully busy? Please say if I'm a nuisance, but I've picked out that song I couldn't remember, on the piano, and I thought p'raps you'd like to hear it.'

At first Bessie seemed as though she did not want him, but when he began to beat a retreat, she called him back. He took Mrs. Filkins' deserted chair, and they behaved exactly as they had done when she was there, except that they sung less and talked more. There was nothing particular in their talk, but it took a colour of intimacy from its circumstances, as they sat on each side the hearth. In this way they spent several pleasant evenings.

There were short blue and white cotton curtains

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to the kitchen window, which Bessie always carefully drew as soon as it was dusk. One night there was a strong wind; a wind that beat the heavy-headed trees this way and that, shattering their twigs and sending a host of prematurely fallen leaves scurrying over the meadows and along the white country roads. The earth beneath seemed full of the tumultuous motion of things and their shadows, but in the sky above the moon rode serenely, watched by a far-off circle of palely twinkling stars.

When Geoffrey came in he flung back a curtain with a sharp jingle of rings.

'What a jolly moon! Come and look at it.'

'O don't!' cried Bessie simultaneously.

'Don't what?'

She stepped quickly to the window, pretended to look out and put the curtain back in its place.

'I can't abide the moon nor the dark neither,' she said, going back to her chair and taking up her sewing.

She denied that she was either timid or fanciful about anything else, but she'd had that fancy from

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a child. She couldn't help being afraid at night that if she looked up from her work and the curtain wasn't drawn, she might see—see something peering in at her out of the darkness. It was silly of course, and Mother scolded her for it, but she couldn't help it. Did Geoffrey know about the Weeping Lady?—No, Geoffrey had never heard of her. Well, of course it was all nonsense about ghosts, but they did say there was once a young lady living at the Manor—that was in the Bamptons' time—and she had a lover. And news came that her lover was false to her, and she ran straight out and drowned herself in a deep pool in the river, just where the canal came in now. Mother didn't like them to talk about such stuff, but the story went that the lady's ghost walked by the river there.

There were people in Old Milton and Church Milton too, who declared they'd not been able to get their dogs past Weeping Ferry at night; the poor beasts trembled and whined so pitiful. And sometimes it was said the lady walked across the Long Meadows to the Manor, sighing and wailing all the way and with the wet dripping from her

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clothes as she went, and she never came into the house, but walked round and round it on the little flagged path, and looked in at the windows as she passed, as though poor soul, she were seeking to be let in. Mother didn't believe a word of it, and went out by herself at all hours, when the cows wanted seeing to. But Father declared that once he—— Here Bessie broke off with a sharp little cry, and jumped up so precipitately that she scattered her work things all over the floor. She caught Geoffrey by the shoulder, staring at the door, which opened into the porch.

'Look!' she whispered, pointing; and had to swallow something in her throat before she could articulate again, 'Look!' Geoffrey turned his head hurriedly. A hole some five or six inches square had been cut out of the door and a pane of glass let in. This aperture which had been dark, was now filled by something white; a whiteness as of a pallid human face pressed against the glass, and broken by two shadowy pits for eyes. For a minute or more the two young people remained pressed together, fixed in a horrified stare at the

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white thing, which seemed to be looking at them. Then the aperture was dark again.

They neither of them spoke, but Geoffrey walked to the door, opened it, and stepped out into the blackness of the porch. Outside in the moonlight, slowly mounting the steps, he saw the figure of a woman; a little old woman with a grey knitted shawl tied over her head and shoulders, and a thin cotton skirt and apron, which the wind blew wildly about her. Geoffrey called after her, but she went on mounting the steps at the same slow pace. At the top of them she paused. She had got out of the shelter of the house and a gust of wind caught her and almost whirled her round.

Bessie had stepped out into the porch and stood behind Geoffrey.

'Why, if it ain't old Catharine!' she cried. And her terror turned to irritation, violent with the reaction of her shaken nerves. She bounded half-way up the steps and caught Catharine by the skirt. The old woman turned with a harsh cry of fear and anger, and tried to pull away her

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dress. Bessie held it fast. The wind wrapped her own black dress about her, and blew her black hair from her forehead in fantastic little streamers.

'Catharine!' she shrieked. 'How dare you come crouping and spying about the place at this time o' night? What do you mean by——' She ended with an 'Oh!' clapping her hand to her mouth. Catharine had dashed five yellow talons up the length of it, and the blood spurted. Bessie dropped down the steps she had mounted, nursing her bleeding hand. Old Catharine turned her head this way and that, as though hesitating whether to go or stay; then went slowly towards the gate.

Bessie, taking her hand from her mouth, broke into an hysterical laugh.

'O dear, O dear! I really did take her for a ghost!' Geoffrey laughed too, embarrassed.

Catharine, not yet half-way to the gate, glanced quickly round. Bessie's laugh had pierced her dull ears, and her keen eyes caught them both still laughing in the moonlight. In a moment she was back

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again at the top of the steps. Her hands clutched her skirt in a convulsion of rage, and she stooped to bring her face nearer to them.

'Ha, ha! He, he!' she shrieked, mocking their laughter, with chin thrust out and crooked mouth, gaping mere blackness in the moonlight. For a minute she cried out shrilly, with a sound hardly more human than the whine of the wind round the corner of the house. Then her voice fell and distinct words came.

'Laugh—laugh at old Catharine, did you? I'll see you laugh wrong side your mouth, Bessie Vyne. I watched you—I'll tell—you and gentleman. He won't marry you—not he. I know gentlemen. Send you to the devil, and serve you right. He'll send you to the devil, you——'

Geoffrey, who had stood for a moment as though petrified, was now close to her. He placed his hands on her shoulders and endeavoured to turn her round in the direction of the gate. For a few moments she attempted to resist, pouring out half-articulate curses. Then twisting away from under

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his hand, she ran along the paved path, through the gate and away round the corner of the garden, with the lightness of a withered leaf before the wind. Geoffrey walked to the gate, which he shut, and stood looking after her, cursing also, between his teeth. When he turned round, Bessie was gone. The moonlight was stealing along the front of the old house, silvering its roof and slanting black shadows across it from the least projection of its stonework. The tall sunflowers in the garden tossed and bowed before the gale till they almost swept the ground, clapping their broad leaves together with a cheerless sound. From time to time the branch of an elm outside answered them with a groan. Geoffrey stood there in the wind, miserable with the acute and helpless misery of youth, placed suddenly in an awkward situation. He felt that he ought to go indoors and say something to Bessie, but he could not for the life of him think of the right thing to say. In a few minutes he gave up trying to think and walked into the kitchen, trusting to fate. To his relief Bessie was not there. He went through into the passage. A

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small table stood there with a shiny cloth on it, a petroleum lamp, and beside that his bedroom candle and matches, placed ready for him. The old staircase of the Manor had been burnt down years ago, and the lamp lighted a narrow white deal stair, very clean and very steep. It looked cheerless, and so did the parlour, where the lamp had smouldered low and smelt vilely. Geoffrey lit his candle and went slowly upstairs to his bedroom. That too was clean and bare, yet smelt fusty with the fustiness of generations of featherbeds. The low four-post bed had very white dimity curtains and a patchwork coverlid which Elisabeth and Bessie had made together when Bessie was still a little girl. Geoffrey sat down on the edge of it. The single candle flickered in the draught and sent a large unflattering silhouette of his profile wavering about the whitewashed wall, sometimes invading, sometimes receding from a text illuminated by Tryphena, with a prodigal expenditure of shell-gold and ultramarine. In a few minutes he felt a flash of indignant contempt for himself. So he rose and stumped resolutely down

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the creaking stairs and knocked at the kitchen door. Bessie was sitting by the table, and as he came in he saw her snatch up her sewing, which was lying at a little distance from her. He came in slowly and stood in front of the hearth, with one heel on the fender. Bessie's dark head was bent over her work, but he saw her handkerchief lying beside her in a little wet ball, and thought he saw a moist gleam about her silken eyelashes. He was immediately pierced to the heart by an acute consciousness of guilt and an equally acute desire to console.

'I just came in to say good-night,' he said humbly.

Bessie was furious with herself for not being able to answer, but she had given way to her tears, imagining Geoffrey to be safe upstairs, and could not immediately check them. Geoffrey turned one of the large china dogs a little, carefully, as though its lifted nose and round O's of eyes had not been pointed at precisely the right spot on the opposite wall. Then he glanced down again and saw a bright drop just falling on Bessie's work. In a moment

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he was on his knees by the table, leaning his arm on it.

'Please don't cry, Bessie,' he said, 'I can't tell you how sorry I am—I'm afraid it's upset you most awfully.'

Bessie murmured something husky about it being perfectly horrid, but not his fault.

'O yes it is! I ought to have prevented it. I ought to have kicked the old [illegible] wretch out before she could get up her steam. I'm sure it's my fault somehow. I can feel it is.'

'O no, no! It's not a bit. And anyhow she'd seen.'

'But there wasn't anything to see, my dear girl.'

'No, but she'll say—O dear!' And Bessie put her arm on the back of her chair and laid her forehead on it.

'Never mind what she says——' Geoffrey was unconsciously edging nearer to Bessie as he talked —'For one thing, not a soul can understand her jabber, except your mother.'

'But she'll say to her—and O, Mother will be so vexed!'

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There was a pause.

'I suppose I oughtn't to have come into the kitchen,' he said ruefully. 'I knew it was my fault somehow.'

'No, no!' cried Bessie. 'It was most kind of you, I'm sure. I should have been dreadful dull of an evening all by myself. And—and there wasn't any harm.'

She blushed faintly and turned away, twisting her wet handkerchief round her fingers.

'Will your mother scold you, Bessie?' he asked.

'I don't know about scold; she don't say much, but I can't bear Mother to be vexed with me. I'm quite childish, as you may say, about it.'

'But she can't be vexed: at least not with you,' said he, with cheerful conviction.

'O yes, she will. Mother's awful good and kind, but she's so very—well, I don't know—so very——'

She twisted herself still more round from him, and dabbed the wet handkerchief hastily on her eyes. This fresh outbreak of tears was more than

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Geoffrey could stand. Before he quite knew what he was doing his arm was round her waist and a little kiss fell haphazard just between her cheek and throat.

'Poor little Bessie! Don't cry,' he said softly in her ear. At the touch of his hand and lips Bessie seemed to herself to start; but it was only a start of the blood, not outwardly perceptible. The tears dried up in her eyes as though by magic, her breath came pantingly, and she drew a little towards him instinctively, her thoughts at an entire pause. He kissed her again, this time on her chin, just below the corner of her mouth.

'Come, cheer up, old girl,' he said. But it did not matter to himself or to her precisely what he said. It was an utterance of caress and comfort independent of words.

The back door opened with a clattering noise.

It was Thomas Vyne, returning from the 'Seven Stars' and stumbling over a row of milk-pails put ready for the morning's use.

Geoffrey rose hastily from his knees.

'I suppose I'd better be off,' he said. 'Good-

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night, Bessie. Now mind, you're not to cry any more.'

He went upstairs, and fancied that Thomas, somewhere in the background among the milk-pails, did not observe him. But Thomas, closing the kitchen door behind him with a meaning grin, said to his daughter:

'Ullo, Bessie! Gettin' a sweet'eart?'

'No, Father. Please don't talk nonsense.'

'Nonsense, is it? I've seen a bit more of the world nor you have, or our mother either, for the matter o' that, and I say Geof Meade's gettin' uncommon sweet on you. Well, I've known queerer things to 'appen than for a good-lookin' girl like you to get married by a gentleman.'

'Don't, Father! I'm sure I never thought of anything of the kind.'

'Ha, ha! 'Aven't yer now? But 'ave it yer own way, Bessie. I ain't a-going to spile sport. But remember this, my gurl'—and he wagged his head solemnly—'the Vynes 'ave seen better days, as well you know. Yer poor old father come down in the world and married a labourer's daughter—

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all his own fault, my dear, his own fault!—but it 'ud be a great comfort to 'im in his old age to see his gurl a-ridin' in her kerridge.'

He was in a sentimental stage, and went to bed feeling a good father.

Bessie had usually but a moderate amount of respect for her father's ideas, but on this occasion they influenced her more than she would have been willing to allow. Instead of jumping into bed quickly, as usual, she undressed slowly, with many pauses, though the wind that roared in the chimney and shook the leaded casements, chilled her bare arms and shoulders. As she sat on the bed with her loosened hair about her, she happened to catch sight of her own reflection in the shabby little looking-glass. She fixed her eyes on it for several minutes with an earnest scrutiny; then flung herself face-foremost on the pillow, in a rapture of she knew not what. Up to the day when Geoffrey had helped her to hang out the clothes, she had been one of those exceedingly rare women who are really unaware of their own beauty, or at any rate of its power. Such unconsciousness is supposed to

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add a charm, and the appearance of it does so; but the reality blunts the edge of beauty even more than an excessive consciousness.

Geoffrey was also more wakeful than usual. He thought a good deal about Bessie: what a clipper she was, and what a shame of her mother to allow a foul-tongued old hag like the deaf woman to come about the premises. He hoped Bessie wasn't crying herself to sleep; and went to sleep himself, feeling very tender-hearted over her.

There were only five days more before Elisabeth came home from the hospital. But five days can sometimes work a greater change than as many years. Geoffrey and Bessie were more constantly together than before. Their conversation when alone became disconnected, and when connected somewhat vacuous; for they were too much absorbed in the fact of each other's presence to care what they were talking about. Yet Geoffrey was not aware that anything important was going on. He was not in the habit of analysing his own feelings, or the remoter results of his conduct. A strong impulse was carrying him along, and

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conscious that he had no evil intentions, he did not make any effort to resist it. Perhaps he could not have done so if he had tried.

VII

Saturday was one of the days that Percy Augustus Hicks—Mr. Filkins' young man—drove the cart round by Old Milton for orders. Mrs. Vyne came home in it, and he made himself particularly agreeable to her. He had long cherished a humble and tender sentiment for Bessie, which contrived not merely to live but to thrive on her chilly indifference. He was now Mr. Filkins' right-hand man in the business, and being well able to afford a wife, was determined to lay siege to Miss Vyne in due form. Elisabeth, fresh from the seclusion of the hospital, sat at his side, looking out on the world with those eyes of convalescence which see it as it were new-created, and see that it is good. The sunny market-place, deserted save for one girl carrying the family dinner to the bake-house: the noisy rush of shouting boys from the school-house,

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as the cart spun down an irregular street: the tramp tramp of the big horse along the white country road, so flat that the rising curve of the old bridge looked like a considerable hill upon it; all the common out-door sights and sounds, the common stir of life, struck upon her senses with an exhilarating sharpness. Her mood was favourable to the young man. A mother's desire to marry her daughter is apt to be in inverse proportion to her love for her, and Elisabeth was in no particular hurry to find a husband for Bessie. But the girl must marry some day, and she might do worse than take a steady civil-spoken young man in Uncle Filkins' business. Before they reached the place where the farm track to the Manor leaves the high road, Percy Augustus Hicks felt that he had succeeded in recommending himself to Mrs. Vyne. The young man drove his cart, all piled up at the back with white baskets, along the track and into the farmyard at the back of the house, with a dash worthy of any sworded and bewigged young squire, coming to court a daughter of the blazoned Bamptons. Bessie and Uncle Lambert

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were swilling out milk-pails by the back-door. Uncle Lambert, who came in to help at the farm when hands were short, was an old man, still wearing the smock frock and beaver hat of a past generation. He was not known to be uncle to anyone in particular, but was called Uncle as a general and complimentary title. The clatter of the milk-pails prevented Bessie from hearing the cart driving up, till it was in the yard; then she hurried to meet her mother with a welcoming brightness on her face. She did not notice young Hicks, and Elisabeth, climbing slowly down from the high cart, forgot him too. The mother and daughter kissed just once, and then stood looking at each other with satisfied eyes.

'Well, so you're back, Mother. How are you?'

'A lot better, thank you, my dear. How are you yourself? You're looking poorly.'

'Me? O no, I'm well enough.'

Her mother looked at her again. It was true she was not looking exactly poorly. Her face was more fine-drawn and mobile than it used to be.

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There was a blue shadow under the long-lashed eyes, telling of broken sleep, but the eyes themselves were bright, the carriage of the head more alert, her complexion more radiant in its pallor. Elisabeth felt there was a change, though she could not tell what it was. She remained standing basket in hand, in her round black cashmere mantle and black lace bonnet, as flat as though an iron had been passed over it. Her quiet eyes passed from her daughter to the farm-yard, the huge barn with its high-pitched grey roof and the wide black gape of its doorway, where the irresolute fowls hopped in and out; the rows of empty cows-stalls, with orange stone-crop and seeding grass overgrowing their roofs, and the little black pigs colloguing round an empty trough. The picturesque dilapidation of the place was distasteful to Elisabeth's conscious practical self, but it appealed to something else in her, and she was glad to see it again. But she noted that Tom had allowed the manure-heap to encroach over most of the yard, and that a dairy window looking on to it was open, as it never ought to have been.

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Meantime the young man in the cart had touched his cloth cap more than once. At length Bessie noticed him and gave him a cold 'good morning.' He was of average appearance, and by no means a fool, but he struck her as looking particularly foolish and plain this morning, smiling at her through his stubbly red moustache.

'You'll be glad to have Mrs. Vyne back, Miss,' he said.

'Yes,' replied Bessie.

'She seems quite nicely too.'

'Yes, she does.'

'Any orders to-day, Miss?'

'No, thank you, nothing.'

And Percy Hicks drove away dispirited.

VIII

On Monday evening Elisabeth sat alone in the kitchen. Bessie had gone to a Girls' Friendly Society tea at Church Milton. After the tea there was to be an entertainment, and both Geoffrey and Bessie had been practising glees for it at the rectory.

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An instinctive shyness, perhaps a secret consciousness of indiscretion, had prevented Geoffrey from seeking Bessie's society since her mother's return. He had contented, or discontented himself with chance words and stolen looks. Elisabeth had not yet found any clue to the change in Bessie which puzzled and indefinably chilled her. The girl seemed to have retired beyond her mother's touch, into some inner place of her being. She was not interested in her work, and there was an end to the happy flow of little talk which had been used to sweeten the daily toil and the quiet hours by the hearth.

Elisabeth generally read aloud a newspaper or magazine in the evening, while Thomas smoked his pipe and Bessie sewed. This evening she had a local newspaper in her hand, but her eyes were not on it. They rested musingly on the fire, and then rose to the high chimney-piece. Its row of fairings—chimney vases and white china figures with half the gilt washed off—represented to her severally pleasing episodes in her past. Here was the wooing of a respectable tradesman

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of mature years whom she had rejected for Tom; there Tom's own wooing. The brown and white dogs had been bought at a fair years ago, by a general subscription among her children. She could see the proud and rosy troop marching in at the door of the cottage where they were living at the time, Jim carrying one smiling dog and Milly another. Milly was almost a lady now; but not quite, for she did not conceal from her parents that their humble station was an annoyance to her. Jim—well, he was in Heaven. It was sinful to rebel against God, but she couldn't help it if she went on thinking this way; and after all she had Bessie. She took up the paper and read. She read an account of a Royal wedding, not omitting the detailed descriptions of the ladies' dresses; then the story of a shipwreck. Then a paragraph about a murderer caught her eye. It was a motiveless murder, committed on a country-woman near a town about ten miles distant. The murderer, supposed to be an escaped lunatic, had not been caught. It was suggested that he had concealed himself in a string of empty hay-barges,

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which were being towed up to Church Milton. Elisabeth was far from being timid where she herself was concerned, but she was, like most really maternal women, unreasonably so on her children's account. She had seen the hay-barges pass that morning. They were now lying in the bend of the river, just above where the canal comes in. She clutched the paper tight, having a sudden vision of the lunatic, a stealthy figure creeping out of a barge in the dusk. He might be lurking now by the causeway, in the quaggy ditch, where the reeds grow high, or behind a thorn-bush. The idea that Father would be with Bessie reassured her. Just then she heard the back-door open. A heavy step paused in the passage, did not come in, but tramped up the creaking stairs into the bed-room overhead. It was certainly Tom's step, but where was Bessie? He was to have spent the evening with Mr. Filkins, and brought her home when the entertainment was over. Elisabeth went upstairs. Her husband was seated on a wooden box and leaning back against the wall. He was stupid with drink.

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'Why have you come home without Bessie, Father?' she asked sharply.

'I wasn't a going to stay at Church Milton 'alf the night waiting for 'er,' returned Tom, beginning to fumble at his waistcoat buttons, preparatory to undressing. 'It's a fine night, she'll get some one to see her along the caus'ay.'

'And that murdering lunatic about in the fields, very like! Thomas, I can't rely upon you for nothing. You've been getting a drink somewhere, and you've clean forgotten about Bessie. And if she's murdered to-night, whose fault will it be, I should like to know?'

Thomas stared, dull-eyed. The contingency was not very probable, and he unlaced his boots while his wife talked about the murderer and the hay-barge. When she pressed him to return to Church Milton, he said nothing, but kicked them off.

'Then I suppose I must do it myself, just the same as everything else in this 'ouse,' said she, with a bitterness that his most serious offences had long ceased to rouse in her. And she shut the door behind her sharply.

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Snatching a dark grey shawl and a black mushroom hat from a peg by the back-door, she hurried across the fields in the direction of the ferry. By the time she had reached it she was tired, for it was long since she had walked so far. Pale wreaths of mist floated along the surface of the river and the meadows, but did not rise higher. The sky was full of faint moonlight, and the stars twinkled through it. The yellow lights of the town showed in the distance, and even the tall spire, ghostly and dim. On the other side of the river the white causeway lay straight, barred at intervals with black shadows. Not a leaf stirred, and there was no sound except the baaing of a wakeful sheep and the trickle of the water through the chinks in the lock gates. Her agitation suddenly appeared to her to be foolish. She thought she would turn into the Round House and see Catharine, whom she had not seen since her return from the hospital. There was neither blind nor curtain to the window of the Round House. A petroleum lamp stood on the rickety table in the middle of the room, and by its light she could see the old woman sitting on a

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low stool before the fire, smoking a pipe. The door was unlatched and she went in. Catharine greeted her less cordially than she had expected, and seating herself again on the stool, relit her pipe, with furtive sidelong glances. Elisabeth talked about her illness and the hospital, without receiving any response, and went on to explain that she had come out to meet Bessie. Bessie's name reached old Catharine's consciousness. It kindled a spark in her narrow deep-sunken eye. She took the pipe out of her mouth, held it up in her left hand and grasped Elisabeth's knee with the other small knotty hand, looking up half-defiantly into her face.

'Yes, I seen Bessie,' she said, 'I seen her——'

The rest was inarticulate. Elisabeth sat up in the beehive chair, into which she had sunk.

'What about Bessie?' she asked. 'Where have you seen her?'

Catharine laughed hoarsely.

'Seen Bessie—ay, seen Bessie!' she screamed, with a sudden unmodulated burst of voice; and put the pipe back in her mouth.

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'Where?' asked Elisabeth, startled and vaguely alarmed.

Catharine pulled at her pipe, pushing about the ashes in the grate with a stick.

'Where did you see Bessie?' repeated Elisabeth, loud and slow.

'Alone in the kitchen at night with the young man,' Catharine meant to say; but nothing was distinct except the words 'alone,' 'night,' 'man.'

Elisabeth turned pale and pulled on the shawl, which was falling from her shoulders.

'Saw her and him together again this evening, out there,' croaked Catharine, pointing out of the window. 'You were mad to leave 'em, Mrs. Vyne —mad.'

'O, I do wish she'd speak plain!' groaned Elisabeth to herself, hearing only the sinister 'mad—mad,' and possessed once more by the terror of the lunatic.

She had risen from her chair, and pointed in the direction of the Manor. 'Did she go that way?'

Catharine shook her head. She too got up and

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drew Elisabeth to the window, meaning to point to the causeway, where she had seen Geoffrey and Bessie exchanging a few words on their way to the town. But clutching Elisabeth's arm with a sudden chuckle, she cried out something indistinctly. The moon was low, yet there was light enough to see the figure of a man in the punt on the other side of the ferry. When first they caught sight of him he was leaning over the rope, quite motionless, but in a moment his arm swung up, and Elisabeth could hear—for the door was ajar—the swish-swish of a stick coming down upon a thicket of tall feathery reeds that grew by the river bank. Again and again he struck at them, with swingeing blows. Elisabeth turned cold as she watched him. Who but a madman would strike like that at senseless things? In a minute the man turned, jumped out of the punt and went off along the causeway at a run. In another moment Elisabeth was out of the door with Catharine at her side, pulling at the running rope which brought the punt across the river. When it bumped against the wooden landing-place, she jumped in, screaming to Catha-

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rine to stop behind. Yet she was not sorry when the old woman followed her in. There were times when Catharine appeared to her half childish; at others she felt her to be sharper witted than herself. When they reached the other side, Catharine held up her finger where Elisabeth could see it, and said 'Sh! Sh!' distinctly. They hurried along the causeway, Elisabeth pausing occasionally to peer behind the reeds and thorn-bushes that grew beside it.

Old Catharine kept close behind, sometimes pulling her and muttering indistinguishable remonstrances or explanations. When they reached the little gate leading into the highroad, Elisabeth leaned against it exhausted, wiping the perspiration from her face. There was no sign of any human creature except Catharine and herself. To the right was the long bridge leading to the town, and opposite them the road to the railway station. The green and red lights were plainly visible. The strange man had totally disappeared. Elisabeth returned to the Ferry to rest, leaving Catharine to watch and wait for Bessie. She sat down in the

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punt, wrapping her grey shawl round her. The moon went down and the stars brightened overhead. The time seemed long, and she began to blame herself for leaving Catharine alone, when at length she saw something moving noiselessly towards her along the causeway, flitting through the shadow of the thorn-bushes at the side. For a moment she was startled—perhaps she remembered that the place was haunted—then, her nerves being steady, she saw it was Catharine. Catharine jumped into the punt, laid her finger twice on Elisabeth's lips, and immediately began pulling across the river, with all the force of her fibrous little arms. Elisabeth pulled too, half puzzled, half alarmed, thinking the madman was on their heels. But when they reached the other side, instead of taking refuge in the Round House, Catharine pulled her into an old wooden boathouse, that stood right against the landing-stage.

Elisabeth spoke in her ear:

'What's the matter, Catharine?'

For all reply the bony fingers clutched her tight and gave her an impatient shake.

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'Sh! Sh!' reiterated Catharine, and clapping her hand on Elisabeth's mouth, kept it there.

Elisabeth did not share the silent but deep-rooted belief of her less intelligent neighbours in Catharine's occult powers. Yet standing there in the dark, with the clammy little hand on her mouth, she felt an instinctive half-superstitious shrinking from her companion.

She heard steps and a low murmur of voices on the other side the river. The rope rattled and through a chink in the plank wall of the boat-house she could see the punt moving out over the pale surface of the water. When it came back there were two dark figures in it; no madman, but a harmless pair of intertwined lovers, silhouetted against the gleaming river.

What could have frightened Catharine? Elisabeth pulled the clinging hand from her mouth impatiently. Then a voice said—her own child's voice, yet strange in her ears—

'O Geoffrey, don't let's go home! I know I shall wake and find it all a dream. It can't be real—it can't be.'

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The man's head—it was the same man whom Elisabeth had taken for a madman—was bowed over the girl's, and for a moment, covering her face with kisses, he did not speak. Then his answer came muffled, for his lips were in her hair.

'Isn't it real, Bessie? Isn't it? As to going home, I'll stop here all night, if you like.'

'No, no, darling, I didn't mean it—I'm sure I don't hardly know what I'm saying. Look! There's old Catharine's door ajar. O Geoffrey, I do hope she won't see us.'

A long ray of light fell from the half-open door of the Round House. It slanted down the bank and just touched the water behind them.

'Confound old Catharine!' said Geoffrey, without looking round. 'I say, Bessie, I don't believe you've told me yet whether you love me.'

Even in that dim light, the passionate tightening of Bessie's arms about her lover was perceptible as she answered—and her voice was broken into a sweet kind of discord—

'Ah, Geoffrey, you know—I do, do love you.

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And I never could tell you how much—not if I was to try all my life.'

There was a pause filled with murmured caresses. Elisabeth was staring stupidly through a wide chink that happened to be on a level with her eyes. Catharine, stooping down, had her eye to another; but she kept her hand on Elisabeth's arm and pinched it from time to time, when anything of particular interest appeared to her to be going forward.

Bessie spoke again in reply to some inaudible word of Geoffrey's.

'Really, darling? Are you sure?'

Geoffrey raised his head and gave a short laugh.

'If I wasn't sure before, I've been sure enough since Saturday. I simply can't live without you, Bessie. I've had a hell of a time trying to, and I don't mean trying any more. I can tell you it was pretty beastly this evening, having to do the agreeable to those Rectory girls, and not daring even to look at you, my own pretty darling. I made a bolt for it, and then—well, somehow I had a feeling I should meet you.'

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'I didn't mind—not much at least. I liked being in the same room with you,' said Bessie, softly. 'But it seemed dreadful dull after you left, so I just slipped out. The others will be out soon, and some of the Old Milton people are sure to come home this way. We mustn't stop here, Geoffrey. O, what shall we do if old Catharine sees us?'

'She won't—not she!' returned Geoffrey, with cheerful conviction, helping Bessie out of the punt. 'Besides it don't matter two straws if she does.'

They walked quickly away towards the lock.

Elisabeth stood in the entrance to the boat-house looking after them. She had not been deliberately eavesdropping, but her mind worked slowly, and had for the moment been paralysed. Even now, as she walked mechanically into the open space before the house, she was like one dazed. A dry cackle of laughter startled her. She turned sharply. The ray of light from the open door fell upon Catharine, doubled up with triumphant merriment at the success of her ambush. The knitted cross-over had fallen from her yellow head,

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and her white face was so wrinkled with laughter that her eyes had momentarily disappeared.

'What's there to laugh at, Crazy Kate?' asked Elisabeth, with sudden irritation.

'Told you! Told you!' cried Catharine, gesticulating after the vanished lovers.

IX

Elisabeth opened the back door of the Manor with a nervous slowness, as though she herself were the detected culprit. To her relief there was no one downstairs. Both Bessie and Geoffrey had gone to their bedrooms; and she went to her own. She kept vigil by the side of Thomas, who was sleeping heavily, and heard the night go by and the dawn come. Her body lay quite motionless, but her brain worked all the time. She recalled the peaceful years she had spent in the Meades' service, their forbearance with Thomas, and great kindness to herself through all her troubles. She recalled, too, the joy in their house when the long-desired son and heir was born, and foresaw what a

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heartbreak it would be to them if their son married her daughter—Tom Vyne's daughter. On the other hand, if Geoffrey were only amusing himself—she did not for a moment accuse him of a worse design—that was a thing which she on her side would not suffer. And over and over again she fell to wondering how Bessie could have kept this secret from her—a secret which old Catharine, and perhaps others, already knew.

At half-past five Thomas went out to milk the cows. About six she came out of the bedroom into the passage, and found herself face to face with Geoffrey. This was surprising, as he was not usually an early riser. He looked pale. A happy lover may be pale, but Geoffrey was also haggard and had black lines under his eyes. He too had passed a wakeful night, and it was not even the first. For several days he had been tasting the discomforts of complex being, of a house divided against itself; he whose being up to this time had been of the simplest and most solid unity. Yesterday evening his passion for Bessie had completely conquered, and he had triumphed in its conquest.

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During the night his normal self had re-affirmed its existence: a self not much more reasoning than the passionate one, but having a good grip of the plainer facts of life. Something in Mrs. Vyne's eye made him blush when he met it; yet he knew he had nothing to be ashamed of before her, for he meant to marry Bessie, whatever the consequences.

Elisabeth, embarrassed by the immediateness of an interview which she had fancied still some hours distant, made a perfunctory remark on his early rising. He threw a towel which he had in his hand, round his neck, and answered that, as the morning was fine, he was going to bathe: so went down the creaking stairs, followed by Elisabeth. When he reached the bottom she asked him to come into the kitchen for a minute. He did so. She closed the door slowly behind her, and they stood looking at each other, both silent and pale in the pale morning light. The sober cheerful kitchen looked cheerless and dissipated in it, with the grey ashes on the hearth, and everything as it had been left the evening before.

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'Well, Elisabeth?' interrogated Geoffrey; and rearranged the towel round his neck, with an impatient pull.

She had always before thought him like her 'little Missus,' but now he looked 'the very moral' of the Squire out of temper. The old habit of deference to gentlefolks in general and the Meades in particular, had never detracted from Elisabeth's personal dignity; but it made it difficult for her to speak to Geoffrey with the authority of a mother speaking to her daughter's lover.

'Please, Sir'—fidgeting with a pin in the corner of her apron-bodice—'I wish to tell you as I know you're courting our Bessie, and I can't allow it, Mr. Geoffrey, indeed I can't.'

'I've not the least objection to your knowing I'm in love with your daughter, Elisabeth,' returned Geoffrey, stiff and flushed; 'of course I intend to marry her.'

'No, no, Mr. Geoffrey! don't you go for to talk like that. You know well enough your pa and ma would never give their consent to your doing so.'

'Perhaps not, Elisabeth. But as I don't happen

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to be a little boy in pinafores still, as I was when you used to know me, I fancy I shall take my own way in the matter.'

'It would be a most unproper match for you to make, Sir, and come to no good, I'm sure. We do owe a deal to your pa and ma, Tom and all of us, and I must insist that you do go away and think no more of our girl.'

'You don't seem to care much about *her* feelings,' replied Geoffrey indignantly; 'but I've no earthly intention of sacrificing her to your views of what's right and proper, or even to my own people's. Why, a chap I know jilted a girl not long ago, and she died of a broken heart before the year was out. How would you like it if I behaved in that scoundrelly way to Bessie, poor little dear, and she died of it?'

'I suppose her as died, Sir, was a young lady. I don't think our Bessie would.'

'Good Heavens! You mean to say you fancy a lady would have more feeling than your own daughter? The chances are she wouldn't have so much. If Bessie were a young lady she'd know

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scores of chaps like me. But as it is—why, poor little girl!—I'm the only man in the world to her. You mayn't believe it, but she cares for me—well, a thousand times more than I deserve, and I'm not going to break her heart, though her own mother does seem to wish it.'

'I don't say but what it would be a bad business for my girl, Sir,' replied Elisabeth, with a troubled brow; 'but if you do go away at onest she'll forget about it. There's a young man drives Mr. Filkins' cart and helps in the shop, as is most faithful and fond, I'm sure. I make no doubt she'll take to him after a bit, if you do go away.'

The idea of Bessie declining on the charms of Mr. Filkins' young man, however absurd, was the reverse of persuasive to her lover.

'You don't know Bessie as well as I do,' he said drily.

'Have you promised her marriage?' asked Elisabeth.

'Of course it's understood. One doesn't haggle over words, like an attorney. However, I intend to have the whole matter out with Bessie to-day

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and get all our plans settled before I speak to my parents. It might even save fuss in the long run to be married at once before letting them know about it.'

Elisabeth looked horror.

'I'm not a child. I'm of age and have a hundred a year of my own. She'd marry me on that, bless her!'

'O, Sir! You'll drive your pa and ma crazy!' cried Elisabeth. 'I can't have you engage yourself to my girl, let alone marry her, without letting them know about it.'

'If you don't wish me to be engaged to your daughter, Mrs. Vyne, I—well, I'll look for other lodgings to-day,' returned Geoffrey, moving towards the front door. 'Of course you can forbid Bessie to speak to me, but I warn you I don't in the least believe she'll obey you.'

He put his thumb on the latch, and pausing, turned round with a little angry laugh.

'I can't imagine what you've got to find fault with, all the same. Anyone would think I was playing fast and loose with your daughter, but I

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tell you again, I mean to marry her. Only, under the circumstances, I shall choose my own time for telling my people, and if you've any consideration for Bessie, you'll leave the matter like that.'

Geoffrey flung out of the room and up the garden steps. He was naturally quick-tempered, and this morning his nerves were out of tune. Perhaps too the necessity for discussing his private affairs with his mother's quondam servant, brought home to him unpleasantly the precise consequences of the step he was about to take. In dealing with his father's tenantry and dependents in general, Geoffrey had an unobtrusive consciousness of innate superiority which was far from militating against his popularity with them. They liked 'a gentleman to be a gentleman,' and the grooms and gamekeepers in particular would have given little for a young master who did not prove himself one by swearing at them from time to time, when everything did not go perfectly right in the stable or the coverts.

The morning was sunshiny, and the mist of the night before floated along the meadows in a bright

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transparent haze. The curves of the river flashed through it, and a row of distant windows on the outskirts of Church Milton, flashed too in the low eastern sun. As Geoffrey walked towards the river, Thomas Vyne was coming slowly along the meadow path, his shoulders bowed under a wooden yoke, from either end of which hung a tin pail full of foaming milk. He wore a short blue smock, and a shapeless felt hat was pushed back from his unshaven face, still sodden with yesterday's drink.

Why, Geoffrey asked himself, with the fancifulness of a lover, could not his Bessie grow alone, like a flower beside his path, to be plucked and worn in his bosom, without question from himself or anyone else as to the stock from which she sprung?

X

At ten o'clock that morning Elisabeth Vyne was walking up the drive to the Meades' house. On looking round the kitchen somewhat absently, after Geoffrey's discouraging exit, her eye had lighted on the clock, and it occurred to her that she had just

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time to catch a carrier's cart which would drop her in the neighbourhood of the station. To communicate with Geoffrey's parents as soon as possible seemed her best course, and she started at once. It was only now, as she was nearing the end of her journey, that she began to wonder whether she had not been too precipitate in coming away without speaking to Bessie. Yet it might have made her task more difficult for her; and after all it was Bessie's fault for having left her to find this thing out by chance. As to Thomas, she was too used to managing the affairs of the family, to have any scruples on his account, and she knew only too well on which side his influence would have been exerted.

Thus, full of discomfortable thoughts, she walked up the long drive, through the pretty park, its undulations dotted with the red and white of grazing cattle, over the bridge across the ornamental water, and so, with a glimpse of trim garden through a laurel hedge, to the front of the house. It was a big white house with a portico, neither beautiful nor venerable, yet with a certain substantial dignity

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of its own. Except that some of the shrubs had become trees, the place was unaltered in every detail since she had first seen it thirty odd years ago. Elisabeth was moved, whether pleasurably or painfully she hardly knew, by this unalteredness; which was in truth the form in which Squire Meade's character had stamped itself on his surroundings. It seemed like a dream, a fantastic dream, that her Bessie might one day be mistress of this big house, sweeping in her carriage and pair up that drive where Elisabeth was wont to trudge afoot, stepping aside and curtesying when that same carriage passed by. Elisabeth would not have been human if the thought had brought her no pleasure, if it had not crossed her mind that there was a point of view from which she was doing a foolish thing in coming here to-day, in opposition to Mr. Geoffrey's expressed wish. Nevertheless she went on. Yet it may have been owing to the subtle influence of such thoughts, that instead of turning off towards the back of the house, she went straight on to the portico, and rang the clanging bell by the great mahogany door. The smart

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young footman who appeared in answer to it, did not look pleased when he saw what class of person it was who had rung at the front door, thus obliging him very hastily—the Squire was furious if a visitor rung twice—to tear off his apron and plunge into his livery coat. There was however, a certain dignity and self-possession about Mrs. Vyne which prevented him from expressing his feelings of disgust. She sat down in a high-backed chair in the large inner hall. She had sometimes seen a poor woman sitting there in old days, when the baize door dividing the hall from the servants' quarters had swung open. The polished floor which reflected everything upon it like still water, the large oak table, the skins and savage weapons on the walls, the palms in the *jardinière*; everything was just the same. And on the landing where the wide double staircase divided, the tall Dutch clock chimed silvery and punctual as ever. It was too incongruous to picture Bessie descending those stairs in the place of the small figure, erect and graceful still under its crisp white hair, that came gliding down with a little rustle of silk, to greet Elisabeth.

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There was a somewhat troubled surprise in Mrs. Meade's welcome.

'Is there anything wrong? Is Mr. Geoffrey ill?'

Elisabeth had risen from her seat.

'O, no, Ma'am. I left him just going a-bathing before his breakfast.'

'Bathing before breakfast, so late in the season! You really shouldn't let him do that, Elisabeth. Don't you remember what dreadful colds in the head he gets.'

'I'm afraid 'tis not in my power, Ma'am, to prevent a young gentleman like Master Geoffrey from doing what he pleases,' replied Elisabeth; her thoughts remote from bathing and colds in the head.

Mrs. Meade laughed gently.

'Of course not. But Mr. Geoffrey's such a good boy with his mother that I find it hard to remember he's really quite a man. However, you mustn't stand talking here, Elisabeth; I was forgetting you'd been ill. Come into the drawing-room.'

The drawing-room was a large room, expensively

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upholstered in a past fashion, and containing nothing of real beauty except hot-house flowers, and a Sir Joshua portrait of the Meade who had founded the family fortunes. But to Elisabeth it represented the climax of elegance and splendour. Outside, the gardener was mowing the lawn. The whirring noise of the machine and the smell of the cut grass came in at the open window with the sunshine and the morning air. Whenever Elisabeth heard the sound of the mowing machine, it always reminded her of this house, where it used to be so constantly in her ears, as she went about her work. She looked round, wondering which of the gilded chairs to sit upon, and at last chose the most uncomfortable one. Mrs. Meade subsided into a low sofa.

'Now, Elisabeth,' she said kindly, leaning forward and placing the tips of her slender fingers together, 'tell me what's the matter. I was in hopes Thomas had got pretty steady and you were doing well now.'

'So he is, Ma'am. It's not that sort of trouble I'm in. If it was a matter of money I wouldn't come to you and the Squire again, not if I wanted

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it ever so. I'm sure I wish I'd never accepted of your bounty.'

'Elisabeth!' exclaimed Mrs. Meade in astonishment. 'How can you talk like that when you know it was a pleasure to us to help you? You're not a bit like yourself.'

'Maybe I'm not, Ma'am, for I'm greatly troubled in my mind. You see it's like this, Mrs. Meade. You put your son into my charge, thinking as well you might, after all you and Squire had done for we, as I'd be faithful to your trust; but I wasn't; I went into the hospital and left him.'

'Of course you did,' interrupted Mrs. Meade, soothing yet anxious. 'We couldn't have wished you to stop at home and be seriously ill. You said Geoffrey was quite well. Surely he's not been getting into mischief.'

'That's just what he's been doing, Ma'am. And it wouldn't have happened if I'd been at home.'

'But what? What wouldn't have happened?' urged Mrs. Meade. She clasped and unclasped her fingers nervously, and the big diamonds of her rings, catching the sunshine, sent jewels of coloured light

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sparkling across the furniture and up on to the white ceiling.

'Well, I'm sorry to say, Ma'am, Master Geoffrey's been courtin' our Bessie.'

'Bessie?' repeated Mrs. Meade vaguely.

'That's our youngest darter. I can't say how long they've been a-courting together. I knew nought of it till last night.'

'Of course it's very tiresome of Geoffrey,' said Mrs. Meade, with something like relief. 'But you may be quite sure he would never do anything wrong—seriously wrong, I mean; for he's no right whatever to go turning the head of a girl in your daughter's position.'

'As to that, Ma'am,' returned Elisabeth, grimly, 'I reckon my darter's turned his head for 'un fine. He swears he'll have her to his wedded wife, and ask no man's consent.'

There was a pause. Then Mrs. Meade spoke again, in a low voice.

'But it's madness! Good Heavens, Elisabeth! You know it's out of the question.'

'I do know it, Ma'am. I told un only this

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morning it was a most unproper match for him, and one to which his pa would never consent. But Master Geoffrey, Ma'am, do take after his pa; he's a bit masterful, and the more I said the less he minded my words. I couldn't persuade him to tell you and the Squire of his intentions, and I was a'most feared as he and Bessie might get married on the sly; knowing as neither you nor us could approve of their keeping company together. So I thought it best to come and tell you how matters were, without delay.'

There was again a silence. Then Mrs. Meade leaned forward and laid her soft little hands on Elisabeth's rough ones.

'You dear good Elisabeth,' she said.

A slight tremor passed across Elisabeth's face, but she did not answer by word or look.

'Of course we couldn't think of allowing it,' continued Mrs Meade gently. 'But we shall always be grateful to you for behaving like this—for letting us know at once.'

'I couldn't have done different, Ma'am. Anyways I couldn't with a young gentleman in my

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house. But with you and the Squire—and Tom's having behaved as he did in your service—no, I couldn't. But then there's my daughter'—and the tremor came back—'such a good child as she've always been. It do seem unnatural as I should be working against her happiness and prosperity.'

'Does she love him very much?' asked Mrs. Meade, stroking Elisabeth's hands.

Elisabeth nodded in the affirmative.

'Poor child!' said Mrs. Meade softly.

'O, she'll forget it right enough,' returned Elisabeth, with a touch of impatience in her voice; but I suppose she won't believe me when I tell her so, for she's but young. It's this way I feel it so hard, Ma'am. Bessie and me have always lived 'appy together, without ever having a difference; but I do fear when I go home and tell her my errand here, she'll take it unkind and think me a cru'l mother.'

'She may be angry at first, poor girl, but she'll soon see you did right.'

'Do you think she will, Ma'am?' asked Elisabeth wistfully. 'Bessie's the last of my fam'ly

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as I've got left,' she said; and a short sob heaved her broad breast. Mrs. Meade rose and kissed her.

A heavy tread, the tread of a big man in big shooting boots, resounded on the two wide stone steps which divided the house from the garden. A rough terrier with his coat full of burrs, rushed in, snuffling with joy at seeing his mistress again after a prolonged absence of half an hour, and wriggling his body about on the carpet in postures of shamelessly abject humility. At the same time a big hand threw the heavy sash up higher and the Squire came in, in his loose shooting coat and blue tie.

'Hullo, Mrs. Vyne!' he said, 'how did you get here? How are you?'

Elisabeth stood up and answered civilly, but there were traces of tears about her eyes.

'In trouble again? Why, the Missus told me you'd got upsides with that husband of yours and made a decent fellow of him at last.'

''Tis not about him, Sir,' Elisabeth answered slowly. ''Tis about Master Geoffrey.' And she looked at Mrs. Meade.

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The Squire looked too, and saw traces of tears in his wife's eyes as well as in Mrs. Vyne's. His face, exuberantly rosy between its white whiskers, took a slightly yellow tinge under the red.

'What's the matter with the lad?' he asked sharply. 'An accident?'

'No, no. He's quite well,' returned Mrs. Meade hastily. She sat down on the sofa and again shaded her face with her hand.

'What about him? Got into a scrape?'

Mrs. Meade answered faintly, 'Yes.'

'Young ass! How the doose has he contrived to do that? Been poaching, Mrs. Vyne, or what?'

Elisabeth looked again at Mrs. Meade, but she made no response. As much of her face as could be seen was very pale.

'Come, Mrs. Vyne,' said the Squire impatiently, 'out with it. It's not murder, I suppose.'

Elisabeth began.

'My darter, Sir'—she said—'your son, Sir—my darter Bessie——' and paused.

Standing in that sumptuous drawing-room, face to face with the Squire himself, it seemed Elisabeth

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found it an impossible thing to say: 'Your son is engaged to marry my daughter.'

The Squire's face became stern.

'Do you mean to say my son's been behaving like a damnable scoundrel to your daughter?'

'No, no, Sir. Don't you go thinking that. I've never suspected un of any dishonest dealing with my girl. If I had'—and there was a thrill of maternal fierceness in Elisabeth's voice—'I should be acting very different from what I am. No, Sir; but it seems Master Geoffrey got courting our Bessie while I was laid up in hospital.'

'Why the deuce did you go there, then?'

The Squire was a good master, but he never could help resenting it when a servant was ill at an inconvenient time.

'They were not alone, Sir; and the doctor, he said——'

'Confound doctors! They're humbugs, the whole lot of them. Look at me; I never take a drop of their physic. You'd far better have stayed at home, Mrs. Vyne, and given that daughter of yours something to do.'

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There was something in the Squire's way of saying 'that daughter of yours,' which Elisabeth did not like.

'My girl's as hard-working and stiddy a girl as any in the country, Sir,' she said.

'Well, well!' returned the Squire impatiently. 'But you women as usual are making a precious sight too much fuss over a silly love-affair. I don't say the young fool's behaved well in flirting with a girl in your daughter's position, Mrs. Vyne, but after all it ain't of much consequence.'

'Mr. Geoffrey's not been as you may say flirting, Sir. He's set upon marrying our Bessie.'

There was an ominous pause. Then:

'What?' roared the Squire, bringing his fist down on a rosewood table, with a force that shook every ornament in the room.

There was no reply, and after a minute he began again, in an ominous growl.

'Do you mean to tell me, Mrs. Vyne, that my son talks of marrying your daughter?'

'Indeed he do, Sir.'

'If you think I shall allow him—Young idiot!

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Infernal ass!—If you fancy we shall let him be caught by a girl in your daughter's position—Tom Vyne's daughter, too—you and your precious husband are uncommonly mistaken.'

'It's you, Sir, are mistaken in thinking my daughter or us to blame,' replied Elisabeth, with spirit. 'She's not one to look after young gentlemen——'

'I don't care who's most to blame,' interrupted the Squire, his voice rising, 'though I've got my own opinion of a girl who can't keep in her own station. It was your fault for going away, leaving 'em, and now you may just go home and tell my jackanapes that I'll see him d——d first.'

'I told him so, Sir, but he did seem to think 'twas no matter.'

It was impossible to say whether Elisabeth spoke in mere simplicity or with a touch of irony.

The veins swelled on the Squire's temples and neck, the red of his complexion turned to purple. He strode into the middle of the room and broke into an exclamation that was more like a roar.

Mrs. Meade rose and staggered towards him.

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Her head was thrown back, her face a dull white, and contracted with pain, and the dark shade round her mouth had deepened almost to black. Her hands were clasped convulsively against her breast.

'Don't, don't, dear!' she gasped, 'when Elisabeth has come on purpose—Oh!——'

The purple died out of the Squire's face. He caught his wife in his arms.

'What is it? What is it, darling?' he asked: but he knew.

'Ring the bell, Mrs. Vyne,' he cried. 'Send for Clemson, tell James to ride for the doctor as hard as he can go. Open the door—open the door, please.'

And when Elisabeth had opened the door, he carried his wife tenderly upstairs.

A hurrying to and fro and a ringing of bells followed.

Presently the Squire came down again. His cheeks could not go pale, but his forehead was wrinkled, his grey eyes dull and sunken. He looked ten years older than when he and the terrier had

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stepped in at the drawing-room window. He sat down hastily at the writing table and took out a telegram form.

'I am sending a wire to my son,' he said, writing as he spoke. 'His tomfoolery may have killed his mother, for all I know—but I suppose he'll come when he's sent for. He's fond enough of her, I'll say that for him.'

'Oh, Sir, what is the matter with the Missus?' asked Elisabeth, anxiously.

'Heart,' answered the Squire. 'She's been so before, but never so bad.'

He handed the telegram to the footman.

'Take Mrs. Vyne to the housekeeper's room and give her some lunch,' he said.

'No, thank you, Sir. I must be starting or I shall miss the train. But you'll let me know about the Missus?'

'Yes, yes. And wait—you can have the cart to the station. Now go along with you to the housekeeper's room, do, there's a good woman.'

He nodded farewell, his thoughts too full of his wife to allow him to discuss further his son's mis-

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demeanour. He went upstairs, but did not enter his wife's room; she could not bear him there. He stood outside the door, listening, listening to every sound that reached him from within.

XI

Bessie could not sleep for happiness in the first part of the night, and this caused her to lie late next morning. When she came down, she was not so much puzzled by her mother's absence as she might have been, because she supposed her to have gone to Mr. Filkins' to see some cows he was thinking of buying for the farm. Geoffrey came in calmed and refreshed by a splash in the cool river, and a paddle in his canoe up its still reaches and backwaters. He found Bessie plying her broom, with eyes more softly shining, a more attractive blush, and a smile more shyly sweet than any Cinderella, expectant of her fairy prince. And the prince forgot his royal parents, the step-motherly Mrs. Vyne, and all those modern obstacles, more formidable than witches and dragons, which lay in

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the path along which he must bring his bride. He alluded to Mrs. Vyne's opposition to their engagement, while telling Bessie of his own determination to have their marriage and future plans arranged before mentioning it to his father, whom he described as 'an awfully decent old chap, but uncommon fond of his own way, and choke full of prejudices, don't you know.' This was strictly true, but Geoffrey had never thought much about the Squire's prejudices before, because he himself shared most of them. Bessie was hurt, but not surprised to hear of her mother's opposition. She knew Elisabeth's loyalty to the Meades, though not the whole reason for it, and was enough a child of her age to regard Elisabeth's feeling towards them as exaggerated, and even undignified.

Geoffrey went to Mr. Dangerfield at the usual hour, and when the telegram came, Bessie sent it after him. He came flying back on his bicycle, pale and breathless, with the news of his mother's illness. He must put a few things into a bag and then the Rectory pony-cart would call and take him to the station. There was not a moment to

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be lost if he was to catch the twelve fifty train. While Bessie was helping him to pack, he observed that this was the last moment in which to mention their engagement to his parents, as it would dangerously agitate his mother. Bessie must cheer up and take care of herself and not mind what her mother said, but write to him every day. He gave her a hasty hug and ran off bag in hand, along the farm-track to the high-road, to meet the pony-cart. Bessie watched him go with a pang such as she had never felt before. It was as though her heartstrings were twined about him, and every step he took dragged at them. Not only was her lover leaving her, but he was going away into a world that was strange, and, as she dimly guessed, every way hostile to her.

He was gone, and the Manor House seemed very empty.

About two o'clock Elisabeth came in. She had walked from the station and was hot and tired. She sank down wearily in the first chair by the door and undid her cape and bonnet-strings.

'Well, you have managed to pick up a lot of

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dust!' said Bessie, taking the black cashmere cape from her mother's shoulders, and turning it round in her hands. 'And your bonnet too! Whatever have you been a-doing with it?'

Elisabeth had quite forgotten the sprightly red carnations by means of which Bessie had endeavoured to give an air of fashion to her flat black bonnet, and, leaning her sad and weary head in a corner of the railway carriage, had managed to crush all the spirit out of them. She unpinned her bonnet and looked at it with a grim little smile, before laying it down on the dresser.

'You see it ain't no use to try and make me fine, my girl,' she said. 'I warn't brought up to it and I can't keep myself so. I do hope there'll never come a day when I shall make 'ee ashamed of me, Bessie.'

Bessie had been nursing a grievance against her mother all the morning, but the sight of the kind familiar face had somehow banished her bitter thoughts. Now as she kneeled down to unbutton Elisabeth's boots, bending over her task

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so as to hide a conscious blush, she answered with tender vehemence:

'Don't you go talking nonsense, Mother. If I was to be made the Queen to-morrow, I should always be proud of my mother, for I don't believe as there's many equal to her. But you haven't said where you've been. Was it to look at them cows Uncle Filkins talked of?'

'No, my dear, I've been to see Squire and Mrs. Meade, about a matter as concerns you, and when I've rested a bit and had a cup of tea, I'll have a talk with 'ee about it, though 'tis nothing very pleasant I have to tell.'

Bessie's brow darkened. She finished taking off the boots in silence. Elisabeth resumed:

'You'll know of your own self as Squire wasn't best pleased to hear how you and Master Geoffrey had been courtin'. How he did go on, to be sure! And as to my old Missus, why Bessie, it have pretty near killed her to hear on it.'

'You'd no business to go interfering, Mother,' said Bessie hotly. 'You should have left Geoffrey to tell his parents himself. You may have killed

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Mrs. Meade, telling her as we were engaged like that.'

'I don't know as she'd have took it better if Mr. Geoffrey had told her as you were married,' returned Elisabeth drily; and rising, left the room.

When she came in again Bessie was sitting by the window sewing. She remained silent, and Elisabeth took the wooden elbow-chair by the fireplace and drank her tea, ruminating the while. Bessie's young brain was working faster, driven by the hot blood which the passions of love and resentment were sending so strongly through her pulses.

'Mother,' she said at last, unable to contain herself any longer, 'I want to know who told you there was anything between me and Mr.——me and Geoffrey.'

Elisabeth, whose eyes had been absently fixed on the hearth, turned them slowly on her daughter.

'My dear,' she said, 'nobody told me. I saw 'ee myself.'

'What did you see?' cried Bessie. 'There was nothing to see till last night.'

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'Well, I went out for to meet 'ee, seeing as Father he wouldn't go, and then I—I see you and Mr. Geoffrey at Ferry.'

Bessie was silent a minute, stitching with trembling fingers. Then with the tremor of battle in her voice: 'I don't know what's come to people, I'm sure. 'Tis nothing but crouping and spying and mischief-making nowadays. There's old Catharine peeping and spying while you 'was in hospital, and then as soon as ever you're back, you come spying on me yourself. I didn't see no one at the Ferry,' and Bessie coloured with shame and anger at the idea of an unseen spectator, 'but if you was there, why didn't you speak?'

As Bessie flushed, Elisabeth went pale, with the sick pallor of weariness and advancing years. She had heard Bessie speak sometimes to other people in that angry voice, but never before to herself.

'I don't rightly know how to explain it, my dear,' she said. 'I did get some sort of a maggot into my head about a crazy chap they said was about, and old Catharine showed I where to hide

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from un. I never thought it was you a-comin' till you was close by, and then I was that took aback as you may say, to see 'ee and Mr. Geoffrey so and hear 'ee tark——' Up to this point Elisabeth had been apologetic, but as the recollection of the scene at the Ferry returned to her, her voice involuntarily became severe and even indignant—'O fie, Bessie! How 'ee did tark; I didn't think it was in 'ee to go on that way. I don't wonder you do colour up.'

'It's not for shame, mother, if I do, for I've done nothing to be ashamed of. Perhaps you thought'—this fiercely—'I wasn't an honest girl. Perhaps you thought Geoffrey didn't mean to behave honourable to me.'

'Nay, nay, my girl,' returned Elisabeth, troubled, 'I didn't exactly think that. But there was sommat I didn't 'alf like about your way wi' un. I don't think when I wur your age I'd ha' kissed so free and gone on just as you was doing with a young feller, more partic'larly in the dark and lonesome like. And I tell 'ee it's a sore surprise to me that

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Master Geoffrey should have got into trouble in my house.'

'Trouble!' repeated Bessie, putting down her work on her knee. Her nostrils dilated and her black eyes flashed through tears of indignation. 'You call it "trouble" his wanting to marry me—your own daughter, and one I did always think you was fond of. I don't know what you're made of, Mother, to go on like this. It's for all the world as though Geoffrey were your son, and I was just nothing to you. You ought to be pleased to think your daughter's going to get a good husband and be made a lady too.'

'That's just what I don't hold with, Bessie,' returned Elisabeth, apparently calm and unshaken by her daughter's vehemence. 'In my opinion folks are a deal better keeping in their own station. You know what Milly feels about having no eddication, and it 'ud be a deal worse for you.'

Bessie commented scornfully:

'Education! I wonder Milly don't know by this time how much gentlemen and ladies care about that!'

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Elisabeth continued:

'You did ought to remember we owe a deal to my old Master and Missus, and one of our family should be the last to do 'em an injury.'

'You always talk as though the Meades weren't made of flesh and blood the same as ourselves,' replied Bessie, 'and all because they're gentry. You can't expect me to take up with such old-fashioned notions. I'm not going to do them any real injury because I'm going to marry their son. It'll hurt their pride a bit, very likely.'

'It'll break their hearts, Bessie.'

'O Mother! you don't mind breaking mine.'

Elisabeth suddenly saw her daughter through a mist of tears. Her heart was full of an immense yearning which she had no means of expressing; for caresses were not in her habits or in those of her class.

'Bessie,' she said, solemnly, 'don't you say that. You're just all the world to me—maybe it's wrong to say so much, but it's the truth. There's nothing I'd set against my darter's happiness; nothing, except acting just and honourable.'

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Bessie was silent. Elisabeth continued:

'It's not on account of notions I'm going agen you, my girl; it's on account o' things that happened afore you was born. You'd ha' been born in the Union yourself, Bessie, if it hadn't been along o' Mrs. Meade.'

'But one can't be bought like that, for money, Mother. Besides, I know you paid them back most all of it.'

'But that's not the worst, Bessie—O dear! it's not the worst. I did never mean you should know, but there—you've got to. Your father made use of money as wasn't hisen to use. It was the Master's. But Squire, he wouldn't send him to prison for it; he only sent him away. Still everyone in the place knowed the facts pretty well.'

Bessie had been looking out of the window, but now she turned a pale face towards her mother.

'You mean Father stole the Meades' money?'

'Yes. It was given him to pay bills with.'

'O Mother, how horrid! Of course I knew Father wasn't sober—but taking money! It does make one feel ashamed.'

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She turned away again, with her elbows on the window-sill and her chin on her hand, staring at the gay garden with blank eyes, and wiping away a few trickling tears. Elisabeth rose and came to her. She was full of pity for her child, yet relieved to have touched the right chord at last; to have found something which could impose a check on this transforming passion, which had made of Bessie something startling and even shocking in her eyes. 'I knew you'd feel that way about it, Bessie,' she said, laying her hand on her daughter's shoulder. 'I'm mortal sorry for 'ee, my love. It do come hard on a girl at your age, especially one as was so uncommon stiddy, and not one for having sweethearts. But I felt certain sure my girl would act right when she knew how we was situated.'

Bessie made no reply. There were writing-materials on the window-sill, as well as a work-box. In a few minutes Elisabeth opened the inkstand and blotter, and put out a quire of note-paper and a pen.

'I don't want to hurry 'ee, my dear,' she said,

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'but we did always use to agree if 'twas a tooth to be drawn or whatever it might be, 'twas best to have it done and over. Hadn't you best write to Mr. Geoffrey this post, afore he's like to write to 'ee, and tell him how there are reasons which his parents know well, why you can never marry him?'

Bessie was still mute, playing with the pen, her long down-cast lashes casting delicate shadows on her cheeks. Elisabeth stood silent too; till suddenly the girl faced round on her mother, with a hard, defiant smile.

'No, Mother—I won't.'

'Won't what, Bessie? Whatever do the child mean?'

'I mean this, Mother'—she stood up, no longer smiling, but with black eyes ablaze in her white face—'it's all very well in a story-book for folks to give each other up because one of them's father's done something wrong and disgraced himself, but I don't believe as anyone ever did it—not anyone as really cared.'

'Bessie!' cried her mother aghast, 'you don't

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mean to say that? Surely you're going to act honourable.' Bessie set her face.

'If he sticks to me, I shall stick to him. I'm not going to give up a man as loves me, the only man in the world I shall ever care a button for, because Father—Father, as you know well enough, Mother, has never been anything but a trouble to us all—because he disgraced himself years ago, before ever I was born. You don't understand, Mother, you don't understand.'

'I understand you a deal too well, Bessie,' returned Elisabeth, her pity swallowed up by her indignation. 'You want to behave dishonourable, that's what you want. It's dreadful to hear 'ee going on so onnat'ral, denying of your own father. Where's your conscience, girl, that you can go sacrificing all them you should love and honour, and Mr. Geoffrey hisself too, to your own megrims?'

'And what do you want to sacrifice me to, when all's said and done? To pride—your pride and their pride, which is worse, because it's nothing but worldliness. *I'm* not a thief, I shouldn't disgrace

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them. As to what you call megrims—O Mother! I wish, I wish you'd understand!'

Bessie's defiance softened to pleading. She sank down on the low window-seat, and flinging her arms round Elisabeth's waist, buried her face in her mother's skirt.

'It's not megrims, Mother—it's love.'

'Well, Bessie, you don't suppose but what a married woman of my age knows more about that nor you do. Say what you will, my dear, you'll soon get over it, and settle down comfor'able with some respectable young man in your own station of life.'

'What, Percy Hicks?' Bessie laughed a low sweet laugh. 'Yes, p'raps I should have married him if I'd never known Geoffrey—though I can't hardly believe now there ever was a time when I didn't know Geoffrey. Fancy! I might have married Percy Hicks and gone on all my life just like you, Mother, thinking love was megrims. Poor, poor Mother! I mustn't be angry with you for not knowing what it's like—for I never should have myself if it hadn't been for Geoffrey. But listen,

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Mother'—and an enchanting softness came into her voice—'love isn't megrims. It's the most wonderful thing in the world, the only thing in the world; all the rest's just nothing to it. Geoffrey and I know that—we both thought of it at the same time—so what's the use of trying to persuade us it's not true? O don't try and take him away from me, Mother'—and she drew her breath hard, as though close on sobs—'if you do I shall die, I shall indeed.'

Elisabeth was silent, unconvinced but seeking in vain for something to say. Bessie looked up in her face and read an answer there.

'But you can't, you can't!' she cried in exultant defiance.

Elisabeth made no response.

Bessie went to the door. She turned and stood for a moment with her hand on the handle.

'If you did, Mother,' she said deliberately, 'I'd never forgive you. Mind that. I'd go down to my grave and never forgive you.'

And Elisabeth heard her go slowly up the stairs and shut herself into her own room.

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XII

Elisabeth had a rigidity of principle which forbade her to buy back even her daughter's friendship at the price of the least paltering with her own conscience. Indeed, the more painful a duty became, the more certainly it appeared to her to be a duty. She regarded Bessie's conduct as dishonourable, her whole frame of mind as in the last degree reprehensible. Fortunately she did not suffer from any overmastering impulse to express her feelings. Bessie had said:

'Don't let's have any more words about Geoffrey, Mother. We can't never agree and it's miserable to quarrel.'

Elisabeth had assented, and the compact of silence was faithfully observed. But it was the kind of silence which aches through all talk. To Elisabeth the pain of it was perpetual, for she had no interest strong enough to make her wholly forget it. Bessie had her own thoughts, and Geoffrey's letters; they came every day and she

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read them ten times over. Elisabeth had no idea what news they contained, except such as related to Mrs. Meade's health. At first she kept listening for quick wheels on the track, heralding a burst of the Squire into the Manor. But as the days passed and no one came, she divined that Mrs. Meade was restraining her husband till she herself was well enough to intervene. In ten days' time Bessie announced that she was to go to the Meades on the following day. She pretended the utmost coolness, but the mother's quick eye noted that she was looking her worst. Her pallor lacked its usual clearness, and mingled nervousness and pride froze her features into an immobility that was almost sullen. Like all women who are accustomed to lifting and carrying weights, she was rather strongly than slenderly built. She would have looked brilliant in a dress which bared her fine throat and arms; she looked almost clumsy in a tidy black jacket, fresh from the Church Milton shop. Charmian, if not Cleopatra, would have lacked distinction in a like dress and under like circumstances. Elisabeth vaguely felt

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the lack in Bessie, as she watched her walk away from the garden gate.

That afternoon Mrs. Filkins called, for the first time since Elisabeth's return. For Mrs. Filkins, being exceedingly partial to muffins and crumpets, had ever since the Girls' Friendly entertainment been suffering from three or four mortal diseases; all of them totally unconnected with so vulgar and unaccommodating an organ as the liver.

'Is your young gentleman at 'ome to-day?' she asked, taking 'support' in the shape of a glass of beer and some cake. 'A most affable young feller, I'm sure.'

Elisabeth explained that he was gone. She was afraid Harriet Filkins must have noticed something between Geoffrey and Bessie; and if Harriet knew everyone must know by this time.

'Gone, is he? Lor'! Bessie'll be finding it dull without him.'

'Why should you say that, 'Arriet?'

'Come, you needn't fire up, Lizzie. You might be sure that with me 'ere, there was nothing went on but what was purfickly ladylike. Besides, you

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know what Bessie is with the men. I'm really quite tired of introducing her.'

'Young Hicks seems to me to be courting of her.'

'*Was*, you might say, last January year. But I don't suppose a young feller with good prospecks like him, cared to go on after a girl as was *always* looking over his 'ead. Now she can't do that with a gentleman, like Mr. Geoffrey, and besides we sort of carried her along with us, he and I, we got on so famous together. You see we're both so musical. I dare say they told you what jolly evenings we 'ad, all singing away together, like so many little birds.'

Elisabeth avoided admitting that she had heard nothing about it.

'I don't know as it was quite wise of you to allow that, Harriet,' she said. 'Mr. Geoffrey's pa and ma wouldn't be pleased if it come to their knowledge, that he'd been mixing so familiar with folks in our station; and Bessie being but a girl, and as some folks 'ud say, good-looking too.'

Mrs. Filkins choked with cake and amusement.

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'Don't you flatter yourself, Lizzie! I can't 'old out no 'opes of it, my dear. Tom he came round with some silly talk about Mr. Geoffrey helping your Bessie with churning and suchlike; but Lor'! a frolicsome young feller like that! Why, it's all a new game to him. I kep' my eye upon 'em the 'ole day'—Mrs. Filkins did not realise during how large a portion of the day the said eye was closed in slumber—'and I can tell you he didn't get on near as well with her as with me; not so free and easy, as you may say. I felt sorry for it, Lizzie, for I should like well enough to see my own niece made a lady. But I've often said it was a misfortune for hany girl to have a mother so old-fashioned in her notions and so unused to society, as you. If you don't take care that girl won't marry at all. Not but what she's nice-looking and ladylike in her manners—she do take after our fam'ly so far--but Lor'! when I think of what I was among the young men at her age! And you never should have let her get such a waist; why my waist wasn't above seventeen and a 'alf inches until'—and so on and so on. The waist of Mrs.

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Filkins' youth was a never-failing source of self-gratulation to her. It dwindled with a rapidity hardly equalled by that with which the waist of her maturity increased.

Whatever Elisabeth might suffer in her maternal pride from her sister-in-law's outpourings—and she had too much of the patient placidity of the peasant to be easily ruffled—she found compensation in the assurance that Mrs. Filkins had no suspicion of the real state of affairs.

XIII

Bessie remained away for a fortnight, staying with a spinster relative of Mrs. Meade's in the neighbouring village. Mrs. Meade thought, not without reason, that Geoffrey would better realise the import of the step he desired to take, if he saw Bessie Vyne among his own surroundings. She had caught or inherited something of her mother's quiet dignity of manner, and it was possible, though the Meades would not have admitted it, that in time she might lose all trace of having sprung from a

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lower class than their own. But at present she was obviously not a lady. The consciousness of this rendered her stiff and embarrassed in their society, although she admired Mrs. Meade and became almost at once subject to her influence. Alone with Geoffrey, all was forgotten except him; and he too was sufficiently in love to be able to conceal from her, if not to forget, the harassed state of his feelings. Unlike most only and adored sons, he was affectionate and dutiful. He wanted neither intelligence nor character, but they were both of a kind to allow of his walking contentedly in the ancient ways, and he had never before come into collision with his parents, even in minor matters of opinion. Now honour and love called upon him to wound their tenderest feelings, and traverse the whole line of their tastes and traditions.

The Squire restrained himself in a way that Elisabeth would not have credited. It was superhuman. But he bellowed savagely in his cold bath of a morning instead of shouting vague but cheerful hymn-tunes, as was his usual practice. He felt afraid of his own temper in this matter where so

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much was at stake, and was desirous of leaving the management of it to his wife, whose superior powers of diplomacy he recognised, and the silent influence of his own power of the purse. Yet his manner to Bessie, revealing as it involuntarily did, his opinion of her, roused her pride; and once in speaking to her of her father, he permitted himself much candour.

Partly in consequence of this stimulated pride of hers, and yet more owing to Mrs. Meade's milder influence, Bessie agreed to a truce. Geoffrey was to give up Oxford and travel for a year, during which time they were not to correspond. If when he returned, they still loved each other, his parents would withdraw all opposition to their marriage. Bessie stood solely on the ground of their mutual love. It was on this and this alone that she based her claim to overstep the barrier of class, and to disregard the special obligations of her family to Geoffrey's. If then the love failed, her claim also failed. She promised Mrs. Meade with a proud confidence in herself and him, that if on his return he had ceased to love her and want her for

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his wife, she would hold him perfectly free. He too promised his mother to be entirely frank on the subject, and indifferent to false codes of honour, but Mrs. Meade had a suspicion that in a young man's mouth such promises were not very reliable.

Bessie had indulged hopes of being sent somewhere for education while Geoffrey was abroad. Mrs. Meade had thoughts of doing this, but the Squire peremptorily refused. He staked everything on the chance of Geoffrey's infatuation wearing itself out. If he lost—well, it was not Tom Vyne's girl having had a little schooling more or less, that would soften the blow. Geoffrey had never imagined the possibility of the Squire being self-restrained and despondent. His father's evident misery depressed him also, and as they tramped gloomily side by side over the stubble and through the turnips, the keeper observed there was something wrong between them. 'Money,' he opined.

XIV

When Elisabeth heard that Bessie had accepted these conditions, she was so glad that for a

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moment it seemed as though their hearts were again united. But the illusion was short. Elisabeth's cautious words and honest silences soon allowed the girl who knew her so well, to see that she did not believe in Geoffrey's remaining true for a whole year; even thought that Bessie's own feelings would have undergone a change of some sort before that time. It was agony to Bessie to breathe this atmosphere of silent scepticism. For a few days after she had bidden farewell to her lover, who came towards the end of October, on the pretext of fetching away his books, she was in a glow of exultation which protected her against the chill of this unbelief. Then again it tortured her, filling her mind with a great bitterness against her mother, whom she had not yet forgiven for betraying the secret of her engagement to Geoffrey's parents. She prayed with tears to be delivered from this terrible feeling of resentment; but still it was there. At any rate she could not and would not spend her year of probation at home, in a daily round of work that had lost all interest for her. As the Meades would do nothing

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to educate her, she resolved to go into service in London, where she could observe the manners of ladies, and model her own upon them.

Elisabeth did not oppose this plan. From the first she had foreseen that, however else this unfortunate business might end, it would end in her losing Bessie. Girls who had had a love affair always wanted a change; and her other children had all told her that Milton was but a dull place for young people. She did not guess the bitterness of Bessie's resentment against herself; yet she knew there was a change, a cruel change between them. The good happy times were over, just as the bad ones before them had been over. Summer and winter, seed-time and harvest—and most like a bad harvest at that—such was the order of the world, and where was the use of complaining? Elisabeth Vyne set her lips close, and did her work well.

XV

It happened that Mrs. Dangerfield was able to send Bessie at once to a situation which was appa-

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rently a good one. Her mistress was a daughter of Lord Riversham's, married to a rich button-maker. The plain country cousins of his Lordship knew no more than Elisabeth herself of the modern developments of old families. Lady Maud Bryant was a typical member of that noisily foolish little set which the solemnly foolish take at their own valuation, and call Society. Her house was a kind of Bedlam, where men and women bolstered and kissed each other about the passages and bedrooms, ruined each other at cards, and—the feminine portion of them—appeared in tights in the drawing-room, on the smallest theatrical provocation. The servants were scarcely more respectable than their employers. Bessie found herself so strange in this household, and so scandalised by all she saw and heard, that only the strongest reasons would have kept her there. But she knew that Mrs. Dangerfield would be angry with her if she left, and she would probably have difficulty in finding another place. Anything was better than home. Gradually she became more accustomed to her surroundings. The men-

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servants did not admire her sufficiently to brave her rebuffs, the housekeeper praised her, and most of the other women-servants were good-natured, if not immaculate. Sometimes gentlemen who came to the house paid her attentions; but she dismissed them as haughtily as she dismissed their valets. There was one exception; she was children's maid, and often used to sit in the nursery of an afternoon, with her sewing. A cousin of Lady Maud's used sometimes to come there on the pretext of seeking the youngest girl, who was only eight. This young man—his name was Causton—enjoyed in the most literal sense of the word a bad reputation, but he was very superior in culture to the other frequenters of the house. He appreciated the possibilities of Bessie's beauty; her simplicity and ignorant intelligence interested him. He used to say that his talks with her, in the intervals of his ordinary society, refreshed him like eating a luscious fruit after a course of biscuits and anchovies. Bessie too could not help enjoying them. They seemed really to

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assist her in her endeavour to educate herself, as nothing else in that house could do.

But more and more every day her thoughts centred on Geoffrey, and on his return.

Meantime Elisabeth was working harder than ever, in consequence of her daughter's absence. She had little leisure for brooding, yet at the back of her mind was the constant sense of loneliness, and of something painful to come. She was completely sceptical as to Geoffrey's wanting to marry Bessie after being away for a whole year, and having seen something of the world. It troubled her to think of her girl's disappointment, and probable anger against herself. Yet as she sat by the fire of an evening, she looked beyond that, and saw Bessie settling down comfortably in Church Milton, as Mrs. Hicks. Elisabeth's temperament and misfortunes alike led her to believe that any right-minded woman must be happy, if her husband was only sufficiently kind and respectable. The young man with the red moustache never came on his rounds without stopping to chat with her, and both of them willingly brought the conversation round

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to the absent one. There are men in whom constancy appears so inevitable that it almost ceases to be a virtue. At any rate it ceases to be a compliment to its object, since it is evident that their affections would cling fondly round a peastick, if once they happened to get on to it. Such a man was Percy Hicks. In July, when Bessie's employers went abroad and she came home for a short holiday, he found innumerable pretexts for calling. She said she couldn't bear the sight of him. Nevertheless he continued to pursue her, with the irritating gaze of dog-like devotion. Bessie gathered from the manner of the two, rather than from any obvious support lent him by Elisabeth, that he was her mother's candidate for her hand, in case the other one failed. And the gulf between mother and daughter widened.

XVI

> So I says, Mary Anne, I shall ever love you,
> Though you be ser cruel to me.

Old Uncle Lambert quavered to himself in the slow sing-song which does duty with the Midland

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Englishman for every description of tune, as he collected the last wisps of hay with his two-pronged fork. The July evening was threatening, and all hands had been at work in the broad meadow between the Manor and Weeping Ferry, piling the deep hay in cocks against the coming rain. Bessie in her white sun-bonnet and apron had been helping the old man to build the last haycock between two willows at the river's edge. She stood now watching the brown water gliding under the willow branches; and as she stood there, passed her finger with a concerned air along one satiny black eyebrow.

'I do believe I have got a wart coming!' she exclaimed.

'You go to old Catharine, Missie. I warr'nt she can charm wartes away.'

Uncle Lambert spoke in the vowelled drawl of the peasant, which the schoolmaster's clipping cockney has displaced in younger mouths.

'Oh, it's all nonsense about charms, Uncle Lambert.'

The old man sucked his under lip, and placed

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his little collection of hay carefully on the top of the cock, accompanying the action with several offended nods.

'Sixty odd years man and boy I've a-worked on the land, and can do as good a 'day's work as any man in the parish. That's not as you may say a young man, nor yet over strong in the legs,' he said, contemplating his handiwork. 'But according to the young 'uns it ain't no manner of use to pay attention to what old Uncle Lambert says.'

'Well, I suppose people did put more faith in charms and things when you were a boy, Uncle Lambert,' said Bessie apologetically; 'and I do believe myself, there's sometimes a queer thing happens, such as nobody can explain, let them be ever so scientific.'

'If yer mean book-larning, I'm agen it myself; spiles the youngsters for their work and sets 'em above their elders in their own conceit. But mark my words, Missie'—Uncle Lambert was passing his fork round the bottom of the haycock to make it tidy—'You go to old Catharine when the moon's up, to-morrow night as you may say, and let she

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charm your wart, so as it will fall away from 'ee when the moon wanes. You'll find there's others as seek her, for all they deny it—for them's a false deceiving lot, so they are. But I won't go for to arguey, as the wise women nowadays are what they was formerly, as you may say. There was one as lived away down at Long Marston when I was a youngster—she lived in the cottage by the gate, as was pulled down twenty or thirty years ago—she were a wise one and no mistake. She cured I of love, that she did.'

'Cured you of love? Oh, Uncle Lambert, how could she do that?'

'That's more nor you or I'll ever guess, Missie, but she did, I tell 'ee; and I was more beholden to her than I ever was to anyone in my life.'

Bessie sighed and smiled.

'Perhaps it 'ud be a good thing if everyone could be cured of love.'

Uncle Lambert meditated, scrubbing his chin; then, unwilling perhaps like other people to see his own advantages too generally shared:

'Nay, nay, I wouldn't go so far as that neither.

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It takes wise men and fools, as they say, to make the world.'

'Did the charm work quite sudden?' asked Bessie, smiling again.

'Well, it was a matter of twelve hour or more a-doing.'

'Oh, Uncle Lambert, you can't have been really in love.'

'I tell 'ee I was, proper,' returned old Lambert with indignation. 'And as good a right to be as any man as ever you know. Why, her and me—Jimimy Trotter, her whose father was shepherd down 'long o' old farmer Timbs; we'd a-sat on the same bench at school, we 'ad, and been a-courting reglar since we was no 'igher nor this 'ere fark. Times and times we've a-danced John and Mary together at the Feast, for a matter of three hour without settin' down. If that ain't bein' in love—but like enough you never see John and Mary dance in your life, Missie.'

'No, Uncle Lambert, I never so much as heard of it.'

'Dear, deary me! To think o' that now!

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Well, it were a rare dance for coortin'. You just stood up with your young 'ooman, and a score or so of other young chaps in a row behind 'ee as it might be, one behind t'other, each of 'em with his young 'ooman—and there you'd be, a-liftin' up first one leg and then t'other, and a settin' of un down to the music, this way—only my legs is a bit stiff—and your sweetheart as you was a coortin' doin' it for all the world the same. There weren't no need to seek for summat to say, but you could just kip on a lookin' at she out of the tail of your eye, and she likewise, knowin' well enough what you was after; and the music a-doin' the rest. Then round you went, she to the left and you to the right, and come up again the same, only a-changing of your place; and then begin a-liftin' of your feet to the tune again, and a-squintin' at her, same as before. And we'd go on a-dancin' at that the best part of a day off and on, and never wish for nothin' different, unless it was gingerbread nuts, and maybe a peep-show. But nowadays, what with the wild beastes a roarin' and frightenin' the girls into fits, and the guns

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a-bangin', and the steam-engines a-screechin', it don't seem to me as there's much coortin' goes on at Feast. Why, Lor' bless me, when you see the young chaps a-tearin' round on them newfangled merry-go-rounds, a-clingin' about the necks o' the 'arses, or settin' up and lookin' straight afore 'em as white as winding-sheet, you see well enough they ain't got much leesure for thinkin' o' coortin', bein' pretty well took up with wonderin' when the blessed steam-engine be goin' to blow off and let 'em down quiet-like.'

'I think people who want to, always find a time for courting, steam-engines or no, Uncle Lambert.'

'You say so, do you, Missie?' Uncle Lambert smiled knowingly. 'Now I'll be bound there's bin some young chap a-teachin' you that.'

Bessie blushed.

'You've never told me how it was the wise woman cured you of being in love,' she said, changing the subject.

'Well, I did feel a bit ashäamed of goin' to her, that I did. But yer see there wer a young feller come over from Farringdon way, and got workin'

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at the forge opposite the "Seven Stars," under Job Quartermain, him whose son went off to the Crimee and got killed there, yer recolleck—a fine likely lad, though he wer but a babby then. And Jimimy she took up wi' this 'ere furriner, and the first thing as iver I heard of it was their being ask in church.'

'Well, I never! She did treat you bad.'

'So when we come out, I waited for 'er at the corner by the gate under the elm yonder; it wer nice warm growing weather, I recolleck, and the roots a comin' on well, and I says to her, "Oh, Jimimy Trotter, Jimimy Trotter! whatever 'ave you been a doin'? Why the sakes do you go marryin' this 'ere furrin chap?" And she tosses her 'ead—she did use to wear a strar bonnet, with white ribbins, prettier nor you sees 'em now-a-days—and says sarcy-like: "Because he axed me, Joshua Lambert, which is more nor ever you did." Axed her! Did you ever 'ear the like? Why, who ever'd ha' thart o' doin' sich a thing? And us as had been a-walkin' together this seven years! "Because you never axed me," says she! So they was married o' Easter Sunday,

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and I kip on mopin' and frettin' to think how fawlse Jimimy Trotter 'ad a-been to I, so as I could 'ardly take my vittles for it. And it was the year of the Queen's corownation, by which you may guess it wer a matter of fifty odd year back—and Squire Tanfield and the Vicar—'twas afore they fell out, yer see—let it be known as they were going to give a dinner on the green to the 'ole parish, with roast beef and mutton and suet puddens and fruit tarts and plenty of good ale. And yer see it wer an uncommon fine thing for poor folks in them days to get a good dinner, for they mostly got nought but bacon and beans, and glad enough if they could get 'em, and tea and all that dear. So I says to myself d'rectly I heard tell of this 'ere dinner: "Now, Joshua Lambert, you must leave off frettin' after Jimimy Trotter, or you won't enj'y them good vittles, which mebbe you'll never git the likes of again, seein' her gracious Majesty's no older nor Jimimy!" And I'd manage to feel a bit more cheerful-like for a day or two, and then agin I'd see Jimimy a-walking down street, and summat 'ud begin a-gnawin' at my

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'eart that bad and no stoppin' of it. Then I 'eared as she and 'er 'usband, what I couldn't a-bear the sight of, was to be set at the same table along of we, and I knowed as every time I lifted my eyes from my meat, I should see she a-settin' there along of he; and let the vittles be as good as they might they'd fair choke me. So the day before the dinner I says to myself, "Darn this 'ere love-sickness," says I, "I'm blessed if I don't go to the wise woman at Long Marston." And so I did, Missie, so I did.'

'But what did the wise woman do to you?' asked Bessie.

Uncle Lambert pushed back his hat, and scratched his head, where the grizzled hair was only just beginning to get thin.

'Well, I don't rightly remember,' he said. 'She gev me a charm agen love, and some physic—a sort o' herb tea it tasted to me—I dunno. Anyway next day there I was a-settin' at the same table along of Jimimy Trotter and 'er husband, a-eatin' my vittles hearty and jokin' away with 'er and 'im as though I'd never 'ad no love-thoughts

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in all my barn days, let alone for seven year. And I dunno as I ever felt that way again about any young female; so you see it wer a right good charm.'

'But you've been married, haven't you, Uncle Lambert?' asked Bessie.

'In course, Missie; to my thinkin' it ain't respectable for a man to go on livin' single; and they do cheat yer so in lodgins, generally speakin'. Oh yes, I've bin married, and my old missus weren't a bad sort neither.' There was a pause.

'I'd like to see Jimimy Trotter again,' he said. 'She did use to look pretty and neat o' Sundays. It must be nigh on fifty year since she left the pläace.'

Somebody was shouting for Uncle Lambert, across the breadth of the meadow. In the twilight, gathering swiftly under a lowering cloud, could still be seen Elisabeth's white apron, and jug, and more dimly, the figures of the hay-makers gathered round her. Old Lambert shouted back, and hastened stiffly, fork in hand, over the shorn grass, to share whatever might be forthcoming.

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Bessie stood a while leaning on her rake and watching the river still gliding on, at the same even pace, like a thing with a secret life of its own apart from the villages and fields through which it passed for ever; a secret goal of its own, of which it whispered in lonely places to the hanging willows and the grey beds of flowering rush. From the wide meadow opposite the cattle had gathered in to the shelter of some distant tree, black clouds hung ragged and low over head, and the distant country was already dim with rain. As the hay makers, thrusting themselves into their short coats, moved slowly away in the direction of the high road, Bessie too began to move homewards.

As she came down the garden steps the first big drops fell. The kitchen was so dark that for a minute she perceived nothing, except a white letter lying open on the table; then more dimly, her mother in the chimney-corner, stooping over the fire. The letter was on foreign paper, and she guessed at once it must concern her. She untied her sun-bonnet slowly and hung it on a nail, while Elisabeth went on sweeping up the hearth.

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'Dear, dear! What a starm we are going to have, to be sure!' exclaimed Elisabeth, glancing out of the window.

'Who's the letter from, Mother?' asked Bessie, still with her face to the wall, arranging her sun-bonnet on the nail.

'From Mrs. Meade,' answered Elisabeth. 'She's enclosed a letter from furrin parts.'

Bessie turned round quickly and her eyes brightened.

'From Geoffrey?'

'No,' returned Elisabeth slowly. 'From the gentleman who's travelling with him. Mr. Geoffrey's not well.'

Bessie caught her breath.

'Is he very ill?'

'No, no, my dear. Only a kind of feverish attack, brought on by worry as much as anything else, the gentleman says. Mrs. Meade bids me give you his letter to read.' Elisabeth sighed. 'I doubt you won't thank her or me for it, though.'

Elisabeth handed the letters to her daughter, who sat down on the window-sill to read them. It

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was very dark, and Elisabeth could not see her expression; only the fine silhouette of her black head and regular yet rounded profile. The rain rattled on the roof like hail, and streamed to the ground till the sunk path round the house ran like a river. It fell in torrents on the pavement of the upper path, rising again from the shock of its own fall, and confusing itself in vapour. Through the rushing of the rain Elisabeth heard now and again the crackle of the foreign paper as Bessie's trembling fingers turned it, but nothing else.

At length Bessie folded the letter deliberately, put it back in its envelope and laid it on the table. 'I don't believe a word of it,' she said. 'They sent this man with Geoffrey to turn him against me, and of course he says he's done it.'

'My dear,' returned Elisabeth, 'don't you forget your promise. You're most partic'lar bound to be'ave honourable, same as a lady would.' Bessie laughed bitterly.

'Mother, you make me laugh, with your talk about ladies. You're the best lady ever I saw. Catch her Ladyship letting off a Duke's son and

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heir, if her daughter had once hooked him! Why should I do what they wouldn't do? You all of you took Geoffrey away from me before we'd been engaged long enough, or there wouldn't be any of this talk. But even if it's true now, when he comes back and sees how I love him and how I've got on, he'll soon remember, he'll soon be the same again—unless—unless—this Miss—this young lady that's with them——'

She got up, clenched her hands, walked to the chimney-piece, and, leaning her forehead on it, stared at the fire. Then again she broke into a bitter laugh.

'O, what fools they are, what fools they are! They 'd be glad enough for him to marry a lady like Miss Bryant. You remember the circus, Mother, and how we didn't know where to look, because the girls came on dressed so immodest? Well, I've seen Miss Bryant and other young ladies come on and act in the drawing room, dressed just the same. The Meades know no more nor you do about things, or they'd be pleased to have their son safe married to a respectable girl who'd love him true, and never

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speak lightly of him before company, nor flirt with other men—no, nor so much as want to see another man, if——' She broke off, her bosom heaving with sobs. 'But you're all against me!' she cried.

Elisabeth also began to shed tears.

'Don't say I'm agen you, Bessie. You're my own flesh and blood, and there's no one I put before 'ee. It's come to that, that I shall be main glad to hear it, if Mr. Geoffrey holds true to 'ee. And mind you, my dear, Mother 'll never come in your way, to make you ashamed in your high station; nor shall Father, either, if so be I can prevent it. But, O my dear! If you wants to be 'appy, you must act honourable and fair. You must keep your word.'

Bessie was silent a minute. Then she said gravely:

'Yes, Mother. I promise you I'll do that; not because I fancy it's what a lady would do, but because you've always brought me up to behave honest and true, and not to make a promise as I didn't mean to keep.'

'That's my own little Bessie,' replied Elisabeth

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wiping away her furtive tears with the corner of her apron. 'I knowed you was a good girl at bottom.'

Bessie smiled faintly.

'If I've got any goodness about me, Mother, it's only what you've taught me.' She stepped out into the porch.

'It's clearing over yonder,' she said, 'and how sweet the rain do smell, to be sure.'

XVII

The next day the sun burned down fiercely on the Long Meadow and the hay was partly carried. By noon the earth seemed already to have forgotten the heavy rain of the preceding day: but at night the mist floated dense and white over the fields on the opposite bank of the river, which lay lower than those on the Manor side. It shimmered like water under the moon. Far away across the river, a corn-crake creaked persistently; nearer a pair of great pale-coloured owls hovered and wheeled, incessantly uttering their thin, melancholy cry.

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Bessie was walking in the Long Meadow. She used not to walk out after dark when she lived at home, partly because she was busy, and partly because she was afraid of the Weeping Lady. Now the restlessness of mental pain drove her away from the peaceful circle of the lamp, beneath which her mothers at sewing, and made her temporarily forget her fear of the supernatural. She went on, drawn by a vague desire to reach the punt, where she and Geoffrey had stood together on a night that seemed now such a long way off. She crossed by the lock-gates and then stood still. Old Catharine was outside her house. She was kneeling on the ground bareheaded, in the bright moonlight; a woman stood behind her and a child crouched at her side. Both Catharine and the child were stooping over something on the ground which glittered. The old woman muttered confusedly for a minute, then straightened herself and held the child's hand up to the moon, crying out something more distinctly: then she rose, pulling herself up by the shoulder of the child, who shrunk away towards his mother. Catharine stooped till her face

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was on a level with his, laid her finger on her lips and shook her head violently. The boy stared in alarm.

'Do you know what she's a-telling of 'ee, Jimmy?' asked his mother. 'She's bidding 'ee say nothing about it, for if 'ee do, the charm won't do no manner of good.'

The woman took something out of a purse and gave it to old Catharine, wished her good night and taking her child by the hand walked away beside the canal. She did not notice Bessie standing in her black dress under the willows. Catharine looked at the money in her open palm, turned it over, and picking up the metal dish which she had used while charming the boy, went into the house.

Bessie waited a few minutes, till the woman and the child were out of sight and hearing: then went slowly towards the house. The quarrel between Catharine and herself had been not so much made up as forgotten; especially by Bessie, to whom so much had happened since. She felt rather ashamed of going to old Catharine for a charm; yet, why not? From what she had heard in London, she

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fancied all ladies believed in palmistry, and if there was something in that, why should there not be something in charms? Many people in Old Milton could charm away warts, but Catharine's charm was regarded as particularly efficacious, because it was more ceremonious than that in common use. Besides she was notoriously a witch.

Bessie glanced in at the window of the Round House as she passed, and saw old Catharine looking at her money by the light of the lamp, and a box open on the table beside her. It was useless to knock, and, pushing the door open, Bessie went in. She stood a minute watching Catharine rummage in her tin box; then came and touched her on the shoulder. The old woman looked up with a violent start, and began chattering angrily. She kept the money for her burying in the box, amongst other things, and it flustered her to find that some one else was there.

'Good evening, Catharine,' said Bessie. 'I see you've been charming Jimmy Quatermain's warts. I've got one wants charming too.'

She put her face into the light, pointing to the

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almost invisible lump upon her eyebrow. Catharine nodded, and took out of the box the round metal dish, which she had just deposited in it. She looked out grudgingly. The night was warm, but her old blood was chill, and the river mist was in her bones. Now, however, the moon shone almost straight in at the door, and opening it wide, she sat down there on a chair with the dish between her knees, so placed that it focussed the moon's rays. She motioned to Bessie to come near, and pulled her down till the moon shone on her face.

'Wash—wash,' she croaked, pointing to the dish.

Bessie put her hands into the dish with Catharine's, and the clammy little hands touched her own warm ones. Her eyes were dazzled by the brightness of the moon on the metal dish, and she could not see Catharine's face, across which slanted the dark shadow of the door-post. The old woman's rhythmic charm was slower and more confused than when she had repeated it over the child. Not a word was audible, even when she

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ended up loudly, drawing her cold finger along Bessie's eyebrow. Bessie felt she hardly knew how: the superstition in her blood asserting itself, or stirred by some kind of physical influence, emanating from Catharine. Catharine pointed to the moon.

'Twill go when she goes,' she said.

She got up and went to the table, then turned to stare in surprise at Bessie, who was still kneeling in the moonlight, with lifted face.

'Come, get up,' she said distinctly. Bessie sighed, pushed the black hair up from her forehead and rose. Catharine began to rummage in the box again, wondering whether Bessie was going to give her any money. In a minute Bessie came over to her, looking pale and strange, and asked almost silently, with moving lips:

'Have you got a charm against love?'

She looked eagerly in Catharine's wrinkled face, but there was no answering look of intelligence.

The old woman wrinkled her brows and shook her head. Bessie had a silver pencil-case on her

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chain, which Geoffrey had given her. She took an envelope out of her pocket and printed upon it, for Catharine could not read handwriting:

'Have you got a charm to cure love?'

Catharine pored over the envelope, puzzled for some minutes; then:

'No,' she said, shaking her head.

Bessie turned aside and felt in her pocket for her purse. Suddenly Catharine broke into her harsh laugh. She felt in a corner of the tin box, and brought out a little glass-stoppered bottle full of powder.

'What's that?' she asked, holding it up, and underlining with a sharp yellow nail the writing on it, which she could not read. Bessie took the bottle and held it to the lamp. There was a label on it, a little brown with age, and on the label was written in an educated hand:

'*A cure for Love.*' It seemed such a coincidence as to be almost a miracle that this thing should have come to her.

'What is it?' she asked.

Catharine shook her head.

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'Have you tried it?' Bessie repeated, till Catharine understood her.

The old woman shook her head yet more vehemently, and laughed again her sudden weird laugh.

'Not I,' she said, beginning distinctly but growing indistinct as she continued. 'A crazy sort of chap gave it to me ever so long ago. A 'pothecary he was. Awful crazy, to be sure. He pisoned himself afterward, 'long with another woman, poor silly.'

'Will you give it me?' asked Bessie. 'I'll give you this for it;' holding up half a crown.

'No,' cried Catharine, stretching her hand to take the bottle again. 'Don't you try. It's pison, may be.'

'I don't care,' returned Bessie. 'Let me have it.'

Catharine looked at her and smiled slowly.

'Ay, ay,' she said, 'I've felt that way myself when I was young. But life's sweet, life's sweet.'

She jerked the bottle out of Bessie's hand and replaced it in the box. Then she shook her head,

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and putting her fingers to her throat, indicated by gesture her objection to being hung.

Bessie slipped the half-crown back into her purse, and took out a bright new five-shilling piece. She held it up to the lamp and spread out her five fingers.

'Look, Catharine. Five shillings. I'll give you that for it.'

Catharine's eyes glittered. Five shillings! It was half as much as she had saved in fifteen years, and would make a real difference to the respectability of her funeral. Yet she hesitated, fearing for herself, and also having some remnants of humanity still left in her withered breast. But after all the contents of the bottle might be harmless, and yet more probably it was only a fancy for which the foolish young creature was willing to pay all that. She remembered herself when a novice in the trade of shame, having several times talked and thought of drowning herself; but really doing it was another matter.

She put out her hand for the coin, turned it over and felt its weight. She had never even seen

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a crown piece before, still less handled one. She looked up at Bessie under her brows.

'You won't tell who gave it you?' she asked. 'It might bring me in a peck of trouble.'

'I'll promise not to tell,' replied Bessie.

There was a brown, musty-smelling Bible lying on the window-sill. Miss Dangerfield occasionally read it to Catharine, and she herself sometimes spelt in it of an evening, having nothing to do, and being afraid of death and the devil.

'Kiss that and promise,' said Catharine, holding it up to Bessie's lips.

Bessie did so. Catharine handed her the bottle and she went out into the night. Everything was the same as it had been when she had come across the Long Meadow to the Ferry, except that the moon rode higher in the sky, and the mist too had risen higher over the meadows. Yet the night seemed to have become full of terrors, and she was afraid to be alone in it. She dared not look round at the Ferry for fear she should see something there, but ran through the shadow of the willows, over the lock-gates and along the haunted meadow

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path with beating heart, fancying her own footsteps to be those of some one in pursuit.

XVIII

In the autumn the Bryants took a shooting-box in Scotland, which was not large enough to hold all their household, and Bessie might have gone to her own home. But she preferred to stay almost alone in the half darkened London house. She marked off the days on an almanack, to a certain day in October when she expected to receive a letter. Punctually the letter came, and at first it was like cold water dashed in her face. Yet reading it over and over again, she came to think it was not really as cold as she had supposed. In a week or more he would be in England, she would see him, and then—then everything would be as before.

Pacing the sheeted house alone, she held over and over again the same talk with herself, reasoning with her own weak yet obstinate doubts, and always reaching the same brave conclusion. When once they had met again, all would be well.

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The hours passed very slowly in the empty house; empty because the few servants left in it were out most of the day, and often most of the night. One person often came to see her, a good-natured woman who had till recently been maid to her ladyship. She was always asking Bessie to go out with her to places of amusement, but Bessie had never been. At last a day came when she thought she might expect Geoffrey. She listened and looked out all the morning and afternoon, till the anxiety of her desire to see him became too great to bear. When evening fell and she had no longer any hopes of his coming, the ex-maid came to see her, and as usual, asked her to go out. For the first time she went. After having tea with her friend, she accompanied her to a Music Hall. There, either by chance or otherwise, they met Mr. Causton. He sat by Bessie, and made her take his arm when the performance was over. It had been pouring with rain all day, and the crowd moved towards the entrance, a slow solid entity, as though reluctant to leave the shelter of the Hall. In the vestibule there was a loosening and shifting

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of the mass, and Bessie and her companions found themselves close against a young man in a long brown overcoat, who was settling his cap on his head and looking out at the sky.

'Hullo, Meade!' exclaimed Mr. Causton. 'How are you? I thought you were abroad.'

'So I was till this evening,' returned Geoffrey, and made some banal inquiry, turning a face of cold dislike towards his interlocutor. In the hard glare of the electric light he looked ill, and years older than when he had parted from Bessie.

She clutched Mr. Causton's arm with both hands, and barely restrained a cry of 'Geoffrey!' She did not know whether he saw her or no. At any rate he said not a word, but turned his back and went away.

Bessie did not know how she escaped from the others. She had only an impression of walking fast, running, flying for all she knew, through a wilderness of lights in pursuit of the figure in the long brown overcoat. The streets were like rivers, the open spaces like lakes. Everywhere, overhead and under foot, were lights; long rows of yellow

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gas-lamps, clusters of white electric lamps, broken, wavering reflections, through which splashed continuous busy wheels. The countless lamps of the vehicles, moving backwards and forwards, crossing and re-crossing, rushing, crawling, pausing, now all together, now singly, seemed to be weaving some kind of complicated unending dance through the immense mysterious city, dark behind all its lights. Bessie, who had been used to wait for a policeman at the simplest crossing, went on blindly now through a maze of wheels; and everywhere as she went a blurred reflection moved with her, deep down in the slimy pavement or in the long puddle of the street. At length she came up with the figure in the brown coat which she had been pursuing all the time. She touched his elbow, but he took no notice. She took hold of his sleeve; he turned round to shake her off. Then he saw who she was.

'Bessie Vyne! Good Heavens, Bessie! Is it really you?'

'Geoffrey! Didn't you know me?'

'No—at least I couldn't believe it was. I didn't

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expect——. But you musn't be about the streets like this, Bessie. Let me put you into a cab, do; Grosvenor Square, isn't it? I've written there to say I'd come and see you on Monday. I'm only just in town for a night now, on my way home.'

'O, I can't wait till Monday, Geoffrey! I must know whether you love me still. I can't bear not knowing any more.'

'But we can't talk about it in the street, can we, Bessie? I asked you in my letter to trust me to behave——'

'But that's no use, you know it isn't!' she cried in anguish, forgetting everything but his presence and her fate, that hung upon his utterance. The quiver of rising tears was in her voice. 'I mustn't marry you unless you really love me. I promised not to. But you do love me—O please say you do!'

She looked up in Geoffrey's face, and it seemed quite different from what she remembered it: not a boy's face, but a man's, looking round anxious and haggard.

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'Hush, hush, Bessie!' he reiterated in a miserable voice. 'We can't talk about it here.'

She clung to his arm and fought down her rising sobs.

'Maybe you've forgotten a bit, dear,' she pleaded, 'but you'll soon remember, you'll soon come to love me again as much as ever—I'm sure you will. You'll see, I've improved myself ever so much. I have so tried to be more like a lady, Geoff.'

'I—I—O Bessie, I——' and Geoffrey stuck there, not having the brutal frankness to say, 'I liked you better as you were.'

Bessie did not know what the end of the sentence should have been, but she felt it was not anything satisfactory. She walked on in silence for a minute, with the tears running down her cheeks, then broke out again:

'I've thought of nothing but you, Geoffrey, all this while. I don't believe there's been a minute all the time you've been away I've not thought of you. I love you more than I did when you went.

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I can't tell you, I never could tell you; and I don't expect you to love me the same—but O, you must love me a little, you must say you do, Geoffrey, or I shall die!'

She pressed her face against his sleeve and burst into a passion of tears. The pavement was crowded, the passers-by were mostly hurrying along under umbrellas, yet many of them turned to stare at the couple. Geoffrey bent over her, conscious of the eyes upon them, wretched, shaken by horrible irresolution. He was on the edge of a weakness which he knew to be fateful. At that moment Bessie checked her sobs and started half away from him. A passer-by had touched her on the shoulder. Through the mist of her tears she saw a figure rapidly disappearing amid jostling umbrellas just ahead; the thick-set figure of a countrywoman, in a black mushroom hat and a grey shawl. She dropped Geoffrey's arm, and hastened after it a few steps, then rubbed the tears from her eyes and looked again. But the figure was gone, lost in the crowd. She took out her pocket-handkerchief, wiped her eyes and cheeks

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dry, set straight her large hat, which had fallen half off her head, and came back to Geoffrey.

'Is Mother in London?' she asked, in a quiet voice.

'Not that I know of,' he returned, puzzled, yet relieved by the alteration in her manner.

There was a pause.

'You'd better call a cab,' she said.

He did so. She got in, and he took her hand. It lay limp in his for a moment, then returned his grasp convulsively.

'You'll come to-morrow? You won't wait till Monday?'

'Yes, yes, Bessie. I'll be sure to come.'

The four-wheeler jolted away with its little load of human grief and passion, and melted into the indistinguishable throng of moving vehicles.

XIX

The next morning he came. A footman in *déshabillé* let him into the hall, where he sat on a polished chair, till a baize door swung somewhere,

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and Bessie appeared. She hardly lifted her eyes to his face till they stood in the large dismantled drawing-room, the very walls of which were hung with sheets. When she did look at him, she saw more clearly than before that change in his face which she had already perceived; and the perception of it gave her a premonitory chill at the heart. The year which Geoffrey had passed in travel, and also the difficult position in which he had found himself towards Bessie, his parents, and latterly towards another, had suddenly matured him. The easy, pleasant, narrow life, free from all responsibility in the present or care for the future, which he had led at school and college, had left his character undeveloped, but it had always had in it the rudiments of firmness and of strong common sense. He was ashamed of his inconstancy to Bessie, but he neither excused nor disguised it to himself. He knew that not only his own happiness, but that of his parents, and perhaps of one still dearer to him, were in the balance against hers. If she held him to his engagement, he was prepared to fulfil it; but he was determined she should not do so under

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any misapprehension as to his feelings. His chance encounter with her last night had, in spite of his momentary hesitation, finally hardened him in his resolution. His idyllic Bessie of the Manor and the Bessie who went to a music hall in company with a man like Causton, seemed to him two very different persons. He had not slept much that night, and Bessie had still less. The delirium of agonised passion in which she had pursued Geoffrey through the streets had left her suddenly at the touch of a strange hand. Love and anguish were still in her heart, but self-consciousness and self-respect had returned. In the watches of the night her whole body had seemed to burn with shame and humiliation at the recollection of her own behaviour, and there was something hard in her demeanour as she stood waiting for Geoffrey to begin.

'You're looking ill, Bessie,' he said gently; unable immediately to plunge into the important subject.

'So do you, for that matter,' she replied. 'You've gone thin and lost your colour.'

There was a pause. Then she said abruptly:

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'I only want you to tell me straight whether you still care for me the same way you did when you went away?'

Geoffrey passed his fingers through his bright hair till it stood on end.

'I know I'm a beast,' he said. 'You mustn't think I won't marry you if you choose to take me, Bessie, but it's only fair to everyone you should know——'

'You don't,' she broke in quickly. Involuntarily she put her hand to her heart, as though something had actually struck her there. Her face was as white as the sheet behind it.

Geoffrey was not looking at her. He dropped into a chair by a table, and leaning his elbow on it, rumpled his hair again.

'I wish to Heaven I could say I did, Bessie,' he said. 'Of course I've behaved like a brute, and—and a most confounded ass. I must be an uncommon poor sort of chap not to be able to stick to a girl better than that.'

Bessie was silent, and he began again:

'If we two were the only people concerned in

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the business, I'd have married you to-morrow, upon my honour I would, without saying a word about it, and tried never to let you know how I felt.'

'What other people are there concerned?' she asked.

'My father and mother,' he replied, and the hesitation with which he ended would have been imperceptible to an ear but normally attentive.

'Is there anyone else it matters to?' asked Bessie, and there was a gleam in her eye.

The hesitation was more marked this time. He answered in a low voice, his face hidden from her by his arm:

'Yes—perhaps—I think so.'

'The young lady you were abroad with, I suppose,' she said, almost indifferently.

Geoffrey hesitated.

'I'd rather not answer that question. Of course I said nothing, and tried not to show what I felt, though I'm afraid I have. I'm awfully sorry and ashamed of myself, Bessie—I am, indeed. I'll do anything on earth you want me to do, but it's best to tell the truth—I do care for some one else.'

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There was a silence. Bessie was playing with a paper-knife, her head bent and storm gathering on her brow. She lifted it, and broke into a short laugh.

'A young lady, of course! I only wish you, and your father and mother too, knew as much as I do about young ladies, and you wouldn't all be so precious glad to get one, instead of a poor girl that's been brought up respectable.'

The implied reflection on the lady of his heart flushed Geoffrey's pale remorse with anger. He could have said something about the Music Hall and Causton, but restrained himself, and answered coldly:

'No one could possibly say a word against this young lady.'

Bessie smiled insolently.

'So you think. She knows what hits your fancy, I dare say. She might be quite different if she was here. I can tell you all the young ladies that come to this house go pillow-fighting with the gentlemen and kissing them on the staircases. As like one another as a brood of chickens they are, running chirruping about, with their long necks and

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little, fluffy, yellow heads—only some of 'em are dark. But they've all got no more sense inside of 'em than a chicken's got. I wish you joy of your young lady.'

There was just sufficient resemblance to a certain young lady in the description of the girls with long necks and fluffy, yellow heads, to give an unpleasant point to Bessie's remarks, though otherwise they were really inapplicable.

'I'm sorry you've got into a house of that sort, Bessie,' he said, stiffly. 'I suppose that's how you came to pick up a fellow like Causton and be at a Music Hall with him.'

Bessie laughed again, the same hard laugh.

'Why, don't you even know that young ladies go to Music Halls, Geoffrey? What an innocent you are, to be sure!'

Then her whole manner changed. Her head fell on her breast and her arms to her sides.

'Don't be hard on me, Geoff,' she pleaded huskily. 'I didn't go with Mr. Causton. I never went before, though they've asked me times and times. But to go on waiting, waiting, all alone—it was so dreadful.

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O Geoffrey, dear, I couldn't bear it! I couldn't really. I had to do something.'

She looked wistfully at him, with a faint passing hope that perhaps after all he didn't care about the young lady so very much, but was only jealous because he had met her with Mr. Causton. Geoffrey covered his face with his hand and almost groaned.

'If you feel as bad as all that about it, Bessie, he said, 'I mustn't treat you this way. I'll marry you and do my best to make you a good husband. So there!'

He rose, very pale, but trying to look pleasant, and held out his hand to her.

Bessie's eyes lighted up; a wave of blood came into her cheeks; then ebbed. The moment of temptation was over.

'No,' she said deliberately. 'I couldn't let you do that. I promised Mother, and your mother too. It's not so bad really, now I know. It was only the waiting I couldn't bear. Of course I can't pretend I don't love you, Geoffrey. I can't change my feelings sudden, same as you seem able to do. But I shall get over it, I suppose; people always

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do get over it. I wish you all happiness, Geoffrey, you and your bride.'

'I haven't got a bride, Bessie,' he stammered miserably. 'It's only—only——But look here! I can't just go away and leave you like this. You must let the guv'nor or the mater see you or your mother, or something—and do something—do something for you, don't you know.'

'If you mean give me money,' returned Bessie, 'neither Mother nor I would think of taking it. I don't believe you'd offer it to a lady you'd jilted, Geoffrey, and though I'm not one, I'd rather you'd behave to me the same as if I were. I dare say I sha'n't stay much longer in this house, but I have good health and a good character, and I can look after myself, thank you.'

'I know I've behaved badly to you, Bessie,' he said humbly. 'But is there nothing you'll let me do for you? Nothing at all?'

He took her hand and held it fast.

'No,' she said firmly, almost sternly. 'Nothing. Good-bye, Geoffrey.'

He said good-bye, with hanging head, and went

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out. She stood where he had left her, in the middle of the room, and heard his footsteps go echoing down the stripped staircase, and heard the slam of the heavy front-door. Then she fell upon her face on the bare floor, pressing it on the place where he had stood.

'O Geoffrey,' she whispered, 'Geoffrey—Geoffrey darling—I can't—I can't——'

And the rest was lost in a storm of sobs.

XX

The floods were out. The people living on the low distant hills saw from their windows when the rare sun shone, instead of the flat green valley, a long flash of silver running towards the western horizon. In the valley, too, the sun sometimes burnished the surface of the flood till it shone like a shield, but oftener it lay dull and grey, a watery world seen through the dim blurring medium of a watery atmosphere. It was not yet the end of October, but the hedges, already bare, cut it with gaunt lines of black. The turbid river rushed through the

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standing water, swirling round the trunks of sodden willows and fretting impatiently over beds of withered reeds. The Manor meadows, lying higher than those on the other bank of the river, were not yet flooded; but the water was still coming down.

Tryphena sat on the black rug, a rug made of an infinite number of scraps of cloth before a bright fire. It was Tryphena, though her appearance was unusual. She was wrapped in a large grey stuff dress, her hands invisible up the sleeves of it, her feet sticking out from under its folds, cased in startlingly disproportionate boots; cloth boots with shiny toe-caps. Her hair hung straight and dripping, and her own clothes steamed on a horse before the fire.

'Oh! Mrs. Vyne, why are kitchens nicer than drawing rooms?' she sighed contentedly.

Elisabeth thinking this might be a riddle, would not commit herself to an answer.

Dear, dear! how wet your frock do keep! 'tis a pity to spoil a good frock, so it is!'

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'Nasty old thing! I wish I could have left my frock to drown without me inside it! But, Mrs. Vyne, won't you let me sleep here for the night? I shouldn't want a bed, you know; I should be quite comfortable lying here on the rug.'

'Lor', Miss Tryphena! you'd be missing your nice bed fine before midnight, and your little white nighty-gown and all.'

'No. I shouldn't miss anything—except my hair-curlers.'

And Tryphena took up a deplorably straight wisp of hair from her forehead, between finger and thumb, and rolling her eyes up painfully, contemplated the wisp with concern.

'What a cure you are, to be sure!' said matter-of-fact Elisabeth, smiling indulgently.

It was better listening to Miss Tryphena's nonsense than sitting by the fire alone with the heart-ache.

Tryphena put her chin on her hands and stared at the fire.

'Yes, I should like to sleep here. Didn't it ever

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come upon you when you were young, Mrs. Vyne, how dreadful it was to look forward and think of all the days and days of your life? How every night you'd got to take off your stockings and all your stupid clothes the same way, and put on your night-gown and get into bed; and how every morning you'd got to put on all the tiresome things over again, and remember all the buttons and hooks and everything. And then comes family prayers! I sometimes think I can't bear once more of family prayers.'

Elisabeth was silent, stooping over her ironing till the lamp shone full on the top of her head, where the brown hair was getting thin and showed some silver threads. Tryphena gave a deep sigh.

'Do tell me, Mrs. Vyne; are you never weary of life? I am.'

Elisabeth looked up, a startled look in her blue eyes. She put the iron back on the over-turned saucer, but kept her hand on it, looking at Tryphena. It was not the strangeness of Tryphena's saying this which struck her so much, as the strangeness of herself never having thought it. Here was

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this child who did not know what it meant to suffer —for Elisabeth knew nothing of the temperament to which *ennui* is positive suffering—having this idea, while she, Elisabeth, through all her troubles had never had it. Unless things turned out well with Bessie, she had nothing left to live for; yet she had never thought of being weary of life.

'No; I can't say as ever I was,' she replied slowly, with a certain sense of humiliated stupidity. And it was a full minute before she lifted the iron again.

Thomas Vyne's lagging tread came round the little paved path; that ponderous tread which more than anything else marks the difference between the rustic or street loafer and the man of trained alert nervous system. He scraped his boots noisily and came in; seeing Tryphena, stared, and removed his greasy felt hat. She jumped up.

'How d'ye do, Mr. Vyne?' cried she. 'Isn't it fun? Do look!' Thomas did not require this injunction. 'I've got on all Mrs. Vyne's clothes.'

'Why, whatever have you been a-doing to

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yourself, Missie? You do look a figure of fun.' And Thomas rubbed his bristly chin to hide a smile.

'Oh, it's been such a splendid joke, ripping good sport! I went out to tea at Long Marston. Samuel drove me there, and I told him I'd walk back, because I knew what I wanted to do. I tried coming in a bee line from Marston Bridge to the Ferry. The floods are out as deep as anything. It was like a great flood in America, you know, when you are running away from it with all the wild animals, wolves and buffaloes and tigers and things; and you don't mind them a bit, you know. It was just like that. I got over lots of places by crawling along palings and climbing trees, and I paddled a lot too; then when I tried to paddle, a ditch came suddenly, and I went in right over my head, so you see if I hadn't insisted on mamma having me taught swimming at Brighton last year, I should have been drowned. Wasn't it a good thing?'

'Well, did you ever 'ear the like of that, Mother?' asked Thomas, slowly scratching his

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head. 'It's a mercy the child's aloive, that it is.'

'Then I tried to run home, but my wet clothes were so awfully heavy, and when I got to the lock gates—do you know, Mrs. Vyne, the water's so high there it's beginning to run over? I wouldn't have minded that, if I hadn't been tired, but I thought I'd better come in here, and ask Mrs. Vyne to dry my things.'

'I've told Uncle Lambert to leave word at the Rectory on his way home that Miss Tryphena's here,' said Elisabeth, 'and you'll walk back with her after supper, won't you, Tom?'

Thomas assented willingly, his mind's eye catching a cheerful glimpse of the lighted windows of the 'Seven Stars.'

The evening passed off gaily. Tryphena's invariable home supper of dry biscuits with carraway seeds in them, was among the institutions that made her weary of life. Cold meat and beer, toasted cheese and Elisabeth's excellent bread, seemed to her a feast for a queen, and she was the queen of the feast. Elisabeth laughed, and

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forgot for a little that gnawing anxiety of which she was conscious through all her work. She had heard from Mrs. Meade, but not a word from Bessie. Elisabeth and Thomas agreed that Miss Tryphena was as good as a play. But then, as Tryphena very gravely observed, they had neither of them ever seen a play, so they could not be sure of it. Directly after supper Thomas withdrew to the stable with reluctance, still grinning. The only horse kept on the farm had strained a sinew, and required a fomentation. He was so long away that Elisabeth began to fidget about the lateness of the hour. She slipped on her boots, and stepped across the yard in the damp darkness, which protected her from seeing the unclean puddles through which she waded, till the streak of yellow light from the stable door showed them, brown and tremulous, in the small rain. Thomas was doing nothing. He was crouched on some straw in the corner of an empty stall, with his lantern by his side. His face was hidden between his knees and his hands clasped round them. But when Elisa-

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beth stood in the doorway, he started up white, with staring eyes.

'By Golly, Lizzie!' he stammered in a minute, 'I made sure you was—was summat.'

'You must have been takin' the extry glass, Thomas,' observed Elisabeth.

'S'help me, I ain't touched a drop but what you see,' he returned indignantly. 'But I feel precious queer, that I do—ser restless like.'

Elisabeth looked at him doubtfully.

'Damn you, Lizzie! Don't look at me as though I warn't speakin' the truth,' he cried, half irritable, half piteous. 'My nerves is all of a twitter. But it ain't no use talkin' to you about 'em. 'Arriet don't often 'it the nail on the 'ead, but she just about do when she says as you've got no more nerves nor a bullock.'

Elisabeth had heard this aspersion on her nervous system before, and paid no attention to it.

'It's about time you was taking Miss Tryphena home,' she said, picking up her cotton skirt behind, to slabber through the puddles.

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Thomas growled something inarticulate, and followed her with the lantern.

'I've been thinking whether you'd best try the road or the canal,' she continued, as they walked. 'The road's the longest and might be the wettest too, if the brook have overflowed. But by what Miss Tryphena says, it do seem as though the man from Milton Lock had not been round to let the water off at the Ferry. 'Tis well enough to leave it most seasons, for the holes in the gates be big enough for all, but it do seem as though the water were a-coming along too fast, and maybe if the gates ain't set open, old Catharine 'll be flooded out, and the water over the footpath, too—which ain't convenient like for Uncle Lambert or any on us. So I was thinking you'd best go on and open the gates a bit, and come back for Missie.'

Thomas spoke hoarsely.

'Go to the lock—go to the lock, says you. I knowed yer'd say it. There's summat been a-tryin' to get me to the——lock this ever ser long. But I wun't go, I wun't. Go yerself, 'Lisabeth.'

'I don't know as I could manage the gates, and

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'tis so uncommon wet for my petticuts, I do seem to ha' bin paddling like a duck most all day, and my rheumatics that bad.'

They had reached the house. Thomas, muttering to himself, began tying up his trousers with string, and then threw a large stiff bit of tarpaulin over his shoulders, and went out without further remonstrance. Elisabeth was left thoughtful, almost uneasy, having expected to have to open the gates herself, after a prolonged discussion. She stood at the back door watching the lantern, till she heard the click of the yard gate and saw the light disappear round the corner of the barn. Then she took off her boots in the passage and returned to the kitchen. Since Bessie had left there was more needlework for her to do, and she sat down to darn a sock. Tryphena had changed her clothes, and was in possession of the wooden elbow-chair, scorching her boots on the red logs in a spirit of mere luxury, her feet having long been perfectly warm. The mood of life-weariness and that of joy in eventful living were both over since supper. She was now disposed for a quiet gossip, of a mildly scan-

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dalous nature, such as was frequently indulged in at the Rectory. So it was:

'O Mrs. Vyne, did you notice Annie Trinder in church on Sunday? Did you ever see such a hat?' And, 'Fancy! Kate Coxe has jilted our Samuel again. I think it's so horrid of her. She's done it three or four times, you know; and isn't it tiresome of him? He won't tell me the reason.'

Just as Tryphena was observing, 'Do you know there's been such a row on up at the Chapel——' Elisabeth heard heavy feet hastening along the garden path and down the steps to the porch. She paused, with her needle in the air. Some one bumped against the door, the latch lifted, and Thomas flung himself into the room. He sat down on a chair by the dresser and did not take his hat off, but pushed it back and wiped his brow with his coat-sleeve. He was livid, and out of breath.

'Just you give me a drop o' brandy, Missus,' he said peremptorily.

Elisabeth went to the cupboard and took out a bottle and glass.

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'Are you took bad, Tom? Did anything go wrong with the gates?'

Thomas cursed the gates.

'You may—well, open 'em yourself.'

He drunk the brandy, drew his coat-sleeve across his mouth, and returned to a consciousness of Tryphena's presence. Coming forward he sat down in Elisabeth's chair, by the lamp, and stretched across the table towards Tryphena, his elbow in a round basket full of socks. Some colour had returned to his cheeks, his eyes glittered, and his lower lip trembled. 'Look 'ee, Missie,' he said impressively, spreading out his palm, 'don't you go for to think I'm a coward. I'm as bold a man as ever you see if it's a matter o' standin' up to chaps, or tacklin' runaway 'orses and mad bulls and suchlike. But when it comes to ghostes, I tell 'ee fair, my nerves won't stand 'em. It ain't no use talkin' to '*er*'—with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder. '*She* won't believe me. 'Cos, why? She can't see 'em nor 'ear 'em 'erself. But I can; and I'll take my Bible oath I see the Weeping Lady t'other side the lock, screamin' and hollerin'—O Lor'!'

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He passed his hand across his eyes, and drew his shoulders together in a momentary shudder.

This was interesting. Tryphena's eyes grew round.

'Is that the ghost? I knew there was one here, but they never would let me be told about it. Did you see it?'

'No, no,' put in Elisabeth hastily. 'There ain't no ghostes here, my dear, nor anywhere else.'

'Oh no! In course not,' returned Thomas, with concentrated scorn. 'Last time I 'eard un she said it wer a owl—a bl—blessed owl.'

'It's not the time of year for owls,' said Elisabeth, thinking. 'What was it you see, exactly, Tom?'

'Well, I'll tell 'ee as near as I can. It wer precious dark, and I didn't see nothing till I got agin the lock. The waters come right up over the top of un, and I held up the lantern to have a look round, fear I should be drownded, going to open the gates. And I see 'er come gliding up from the Ferry, darkish like, and a-wavin' her arms, like this.

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And she hollered out—well, I know it pretty well curdled my blood for to 'ear 'er, it did. It weren't like nothing yuman. I wer all of a tremble, and the sweat coming out all over me, something dreadful.'

'What did you do?' asked Tryphena, breathless with excitement.

'Do, Missie? Well, I don't 'ardly know. I got 'ome somehow or another, though my legs did seem like as if they'd refuse to carry me. Ay, it was the Weeping Lady this time, and no mistake!'

'It's a deal more likely it wer old Catharine in trouble,' returned Elisabeth drily. In her inmost heart she was not quite so complete a sceptic with regard to ghosts, as she pretended; but she believed much more firmly in a Higher Power that would not allow them to harm the innocent. 'You did ought to ha' opened the gates, Tom. She do stand a bit lower nor we, and most like she's afeared o' the water, poor old soul—or maybe she's ill. But 'tis poor work sendin' men of arrands, for they do always think they know better nor to do

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'em. I'll go open them gates myself. I did ought to ha' done it at first.'

She hastily stuck some pins into her mouth, and began kilting up her print skirt over her grey stuff petticoat.

'I tell 'ee it warn't old Catharine,' said Thomas.

He drew his chair in front of the fire, and glanced uneasily towards the window; then rose and drew the short blue curtains across it, with a rasp of rings, hurried along the iron rod.

'I ain't a-going out again to-night,' he said in an obstinate voice, sitting down and holding on to the seat of his chair. 'Let folks go as don't believe there ain't no such thing as ghostes.'

Elisabeth was buttoning her boots.

Tryphena spoke, pale, but determined.

'I'm coming with you to see the gh——to see what's the matter, Mrs. Vyne.'

Elisabeth thought a moment.

'Very well, Missie. 'Tis getting late for you. I'll see you over lock and home as far as your gate.'

She got up, painfully aware of her rheumatism,

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and fetched her hat and shawl; then went out, followed by Tryphena. A lantern and a large wet cotton umbrella stood in the porch. Elisabeth took the lantern and handed the umbrella to Tryphena. They went through the gate and on by the field path. At first the night seemed all black round the little circle of their light, which fell about their feet, showing the sodden path and the yellowing meadow grass, lifeless and heavy with rain. But presently Tryphena, peering about her, could discern the grey gleam of the floods and the dark masses of the shadowy trees. It had left off raining, but the air was full of moisture, and though it was mostly still, every now and then it moved fitfully, as a person moves in sleep and lies quiet again, and as it swept the branches together, their long sigh mingled with the ceaseless whisper of the rising river. Tryphena listened to these faint sounds, and through them she listened for another sound; for some thrilling and unusual sound, which she was at once desirous and afraid of hearing.

Elisabeth walked on fast and in silence. She was out of patience with Thomas, her rheumatism

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pained her, and she knew that to-night in bed it would be like red-hot skewers in her bones. At length Tryphena, hastening close behind, clutched her shawl and brought her to a standstill.

'I say, Mrs. Vyne, what's that?'

Elisabeth listened.

''Tis only the water in the reed-bed, yonder. Their stems be stout yet, though they be dry and dead.'

They went on, one behind the other, on the narrow path, Tryphena still holding on to the shawl.

'Why, Miss,' said Elisabeth, a little impatiently, 'you're never afraid of ghostes! When I wer a little girl, Mother did use to teach us a verse to say o' nights, to keep us from being frighted of sperrits. We did use to say:

Four carners to my bed,
Four angels round my head,
One to watch, two to pray,
And one to bear my soul away.
Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,
Bless the bed that I lay on.

But our Rector, who was a very good man, and

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a College gentleman, too, he explained to we how 'twas all heathen papistry to believe in ghostes or charmes agen' 'em. For as he did use to tell us, we can't believe as the Lord Jesus allows the sperrits of the dead to wander about the earth, silly-like, frighting poor harmless folk, when we know well enough He's ordained a place for every soul of us, in Heaven or in——'

She broke off. The Round House and the tall poplar above it showed phantom-like before them. The water lay spread about it, black as a pit in the shadow, and beyond gleaming with a pale diffused light from some undivined source. As Elisabeth ceased speaking, Tryphena threw her arms round her companion's waist, clasping her convulsively with a low, 'There!' Elisabeth had heard it too; a wild, thin wail, a hardly human cry, that yet seemed to have some word hidden in it. It came to them out of impenetrable shadow, across the gleaming water. Elisabeth caught her breath, and hurried on as well as she could, with Tryphena clinging to her, both of them peering forward into the darkness. When they reached the lock,

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they found it was flooded, and paused at the edge of the water, but neither of them spoke. They could see a faint patch of light beyond the tree-shadows; the light thrown from Catharine's window, which was at right angles to them, looking towards the causeway.

Again the cry came to them. They were nearer, but it was weaker; at once hoarse and shrill, like the shriek of a dreamer in a nightmare. Yet there was something in it that made Elisabeth start and utter a low exclamation. Tryphena hid her face on Elisabeth's shoulder and tightened her embrace. She also uttered an exclamation, but it was one merely of terrified excitement, without the touch of questioning and surprise that was in Elisabeth's. Elisabeth moved the lantern round, judging rapidly the depth of the flood and marking the edge of the canal. She disengaged herself from Tryphena almost roughly. 'Run home,' she said. 'Run back, and tell Father to come here directly.'

'Back to the Manor, do you mean?' asked

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Tryphena, quaveringly; 'all by myself? Oh, I really couldn't! Do come too, Mrs. Vyne.'

'Now don't you be a wicked, foolish girl,' said Elisabeth sharply, as she stepped in the water. 'There's no ghostes here, I tell ee. 'Tis some one in trouble.'

'Shall I come back here?' asked Tryphena.

'No,' replied Elisabeth, with a sternness such as the child had never seen in her before. 'No,' she repeated. 'You run along.'

The lantern which Elisabeth had set down on the grass showed her already across the breadth of the flood-water pushing with all her might at the great grey beam which seemed to open the lock gate. At length the gate swung. There was a swirl in the lock; the piled-up mass of water plunged heavily into the wide pool below, shooting the eddying whiteness of its foam far out into the darkness, to whirl round and round a few bewildered moments, and then hurry away down stream, surging over the reeds and along the ranks of willows. Tryphena heard it as she trotted along

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the meadow with beating heart but set teeth, for she was a brave as well as a nervous child.

Elisabeth waited, leaning against the beam, for minutes that seemed hours, till the first heavy rush of water had subsided, and she was able by a great effort to push the gate to again. Then, taking up the lantern, she crossed the narrow wet planks. She paused a moment before putting the gate on the other side ajar, to let the water continue running off. 'Who's there?' she cried, holding up the lantern and looking round her. No one answered, and there was nothing to be seen but the willows and the sodden ground. She opened the lock-gate and hurried forward, stumbling over the stumps of old cabbages, till she came to the Round House. The window was uncurtained and she looked in. Old Catharine sat as usual crouched on a stool before the fire, immovable, like some curious figure carved in wood. She was not, however, smoking, but with her short black pipe between her fingers, sat staring at a candle, which had flickered and guttered in the draught till it had a great white winding-sheet on it, almost as large as itself. Whatever had

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happened, whoever had come, it was plain that Catharine had heard and seen nothing. Elisabeth turned away from the window and scrutinised the darkness. She could not distinguish the causeway, but in the distance the town, a line of orange lights, gleamed faintly over the flood. A long breath of air came sighing through the trees and passed away down the valley; the water hastened steadily through the lock gates. Elisabeth remembered Jim, and how he had 'come' to father in a dream at the moment of his death. Bessie had never made any promise, like Jim; but Elisabeth could have sworn that as she stood with Tryphena on the other side of the lock, she had heard her child's voice crying to her 'Mother!' Something of awe and dread stole over her as she stood alone in the darkness; awe of the supernatural and dread of what the visitation, if such it were, might portend. The swiftness of things we wonder at is nothing to the swiftness of the thoughts that are ourselves. So if anyone had been watching Elisabeth, he would have seen her stand perhaps a minute, looking out towards the lights of the town. Then she turned.

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The breath of air had passed away, and there was no sound now but the water.

'Bessie,' she said, in a quiet, solemn voice, 'if it's you, speak to me.'

A moan answered her, a succession of moans. They came from close by. She went on a few steps towards the house, the lantern swinging low from her hand. There was no need to raise it and look round. Bessie was lying on the ground at her feet, against old Catharine's door. The light fell full on her face, as she lay almost on her back, with her head on the doorstep. Her large black hat had not quite fallen off, because it was pinned to her black plaits, but it was crushed and tilted away from her face. Her long fur cloak had fallen open and showed her hands, tightly clasped together, and her drenched, muddy skirts, wrapped and twined about her legs. Her face was pale with an earthy pallor, such as Elisabeth had never imagined upon it, and there was a blueness about her lips, through which the clenched teeth showed. This was not really the thing which Elisabeth had feared and expected to see, yet it seemed to her

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that it was so exactly—that she had come out in order to find Bessie like this. The nightmare foreboding was transformed to a dreadful actuality, yet it still seemed the same nightmare. She dropped on the ground and raised Bessie's head in her arms.

'Bessie—my dear,' she stammered. 'My dear, what is it? However come you here?'

The eyes, tight shut under the frowning brows, opened and looked up at her, dim and bloodshot.

'O Mother! How long you've been a-coming!'

It was the old cry of the sick child whose mother has left it alone for a while, and the old answer came, but in tones tremulous with anguish.

'My love, I come as soon as ever I could.'

'Take me home—I want to get home. But O this pain! It's something awful.'

The cry pierced Elisabeth's body with an actual physical pang.

'My poor girl! My poor, poor girl!'

Instinctively she tried to lift her child in her arms. At the same time Bessie attempted to rise.

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With the help of the strong arms behind her, she just struggled to her feet, then, with a dreadful cry, fell heavily against her mother, clutching at her as she fell. So, half held, half holding, she slipped on to her knees, with her head against Elisabeth's hip, smothering her groans in her mother's skirts and clinging convulsively round her waist. Dragging herself backwards with her burden, Elisabeth took hold of the latch and shook the closed door violently; but it chanced to be locked. She struck it with her clenched hand till it shook again, shrieking for Catharine. All remained quiet within. Elisabeth felt a terror such as she had never felt before; the angry terror of helplessness.

'Dern the woman!' she cried, 'I'll make her hear, for I can never carry 'ee home.'

She tried to go to the window, but could not move for Bessie clinging round her. She tried gently to unclasp the girl's hands.

'Let me go a minute, my love, if 'ee can't get to window. Only a minute, my love.'

For a moment Bessie's hold did not relax, then

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all at once she slid to the ground again, face downwards, rolling her forehead on the door-step. Elisabeth saw old Catharine still sitting before the fire, smoking now and staring into it, while behind her the candle sunk lower in the winding-sheet. Elisabeth pressed her face against the lattice, in hopes that the whiteness of it might catch the deaf woman's quick eye. But old Catharine smoked on. She searched vainly for a stone among the sodden grass and cabbage stalks at her feet. Large drops of rain fell on her face, and she heard Bessie behind moan through her teeth, like one who struggles bravely to subdue her agony, and is subdued by it. The reiterated sound was torture to the mother. Suddenly she thought of the lantern, and snatching it up, flashed it backwards and forwards across the window. Catharine looked round with the slow surprise of old age disturbed in its reverie; took her pipe out of her mouth and blinked at the lantern and Elisabeth. Then she put the pipe down on the table and opened the door. She stood on the threshold in the wavering light that streamed from the room within, stooping

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over Bessie in amazement. Once more Elisabeth put her arms round her daughter, and pushing Catharine aside, half dragged, half carried her into the house. She tried to put Bessie into the bee-hive chair by the fire, but she slipped down on the hearth-rug and buried her face in the torn cushion on the seat, clutching its sides till the joints of her hands showed white. And all the time she did not cease moaning. Elisabeth piled coal on the tiny grate, and shook the kettle to see that there was water in it.

'Catharine,' she said, coming near the candle and mouthing, 'make a fire upstairs please; sorry to put you out, but we must stop here to-night.'

Catharine nodded, and began putting coal into her apron. But Bessie moaned:

'No—no. Not here; I want to get home.'

Her voice rose to a wail, and Elisabeth's trembled as she answered:

'Not now, lovey; to-morrow. 'Tis too wet and dark to-night. I'll go fetch Father, and he shall fetch doctor to 'ee.'

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'Don't go away, Mother—don't leave me. O dear, I am so bad!'

'I don't want to leave 'ee, my love, but there's no one else can find things at home, and Father he can't make nothing of Catharine. I won't be gone long.'

Bessie uttered a sound which might have indicated resignation or re-absorption in that fierce struggle with physical pain which makes thought or feeling outside itself impossible. Elisabeth went out, and glancing through the window as she passed, saw the huddled figure on the hearth-rug alone in the room. Catharine had gone upstairs. Bessie had clung to her mother while she was there, yet it was a kind of relief to be left alone with her agony.

Presently Catharine came creaking down the stairs, which led up straight from the bedroom. She came and sat on her low chair, as before, only pushing it further back, and chin on hand, considered Bessie, with mingled curiosity and compassion.

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'What's the matter?' she croaked, after a while. 'Why have you come home? Got into trouble, eh? eh?'

Bessie lifted her head and turned a ghastly face upon her questioner. She pointed to the tin box, which stood by itself on a high shelf, and made a motion as of drinking.

'The bottle,' she said. 'The charm—the cure for love, I took it. What was it?'

Old Catharine understood, she fell a-trembling.

'O you fool—you fool, Bessie Vyne! I told you the chap had pisoned himself. How should I know what it was? I didn't want to let you have it, now did I? As like as not it's pison you've been and took.'

Bessie caught the drift of her talk.

'I didn't care,' she gasped, 'I thought—let it be kill or cure'; and turned to moaning again, her face in her arms.

Catharine chattered hoarsely to herself:

'O you fool, you damned fool! Whoever'd ha' thought you'd ha' done it? I told her the gentleman 'ud get her into trouble, but she wouldn't

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mind me, and now as like as not I shall swing for it. I see my winding-sheet coming in the candle all this evening. I knew it meant no good. Whoever'd ha' thought she'd ha' been that silly, to go pisoning herself with it! O deary me, O deary me! What shall I do?'

She was silent; then leaning forwards and laying both hands on Bessie's arm, she said distinctly:

'You won't tell on me, my dear, will you? Don't tell, there's a good girl. You swore not to, didn't you? Swore on the Book not to tell.'

'I won't tell,' moaned Bessie. 'I promised not. What's the use?'

Old Catharine was silent again. She rose and lighted a fresh candle, putting away the remnant of the other one. After all perhaps the winding-sheet was not for her.

Presently Elisabeth returned with Thomas, who had until her arrival been as sceptical as to the existence of her person in trouble as she had been about that of his ghost. Meanwhile Samuel from the Rectory had driven over to fetch Try-

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phena. Bessie allowed herself to be carried up to Catharine's bedroom. Then Thomas, who had as much affection for his youngest daughter as it was in his nature to feel for anyone, hastened off to fetch the doctor.

Having got Bessie on to the crazy wooden bed in the little bedroom, Elisabeth tried to undress her patient. She had brought a night-gown from home, for to her orderly mind, being ill and going to bed implied a night-gown. It was part of the strangeness and wretchedness of the situation that by the time she had pulled off the wet dress, boots, and stockings, Bessie begged her so piteously to desist, that she was obliged to leave her lying on the bed half dressed, covered by Catharine's yellow thread-bare blanket and blue cotton coverlid. Elisabeth tried every remedy she could think of, but nothing brought the least cessation of the terrible pain. Only to herself the preparation of each in succession brought some relief—the hope that this one would do Bessie good. At length there was nothing to do but to sit by the bed, giving Bessie her hands and arms to clasp and

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wring, and herself breaking out every few minutes into half-articulate moans of tenderness and compassion.

'However could they send 'ee home in such a state!' she cried. 'They must be a stony-'earted lot!'

'They didn't know,' gasped Bessie; 'I wasn't like this when I started. But I felt queer—I wanted to get home, somehow. Then it came on bad in the train, but I managed to get a cab at Mannington, and drove all the way as far as the end of the causeway. He wouldn't come no further because of the floods, and I'd not got money enough for him.' It all came out brokenly.

'But whatever's made you so bad, my girl?' asked Elisabeth.

Bessie moaned, and turned away without replying. Presently she said:

'Mother, do you think I'm going to die?'

The word 'die' struck on Elisabeth with a cold shock. Instinctively she uttered a vehement denial.

'I thought I wanted to die—but, O Mother, I

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don't want to—I don't! When will the doctor come?'

'Soon, lovey, soon.'

Perhaps it was really soon, but it seemed a very long while.

At length there was a tread of heavy feet and a sound of men's voices below. Elisabeth went downstairs and met Thomas coming up.

'I've brought Dr. Bates,' he said. 'Dr. Thomson's away, and won't be home for a week or more. 'E's as drunk as a lord,' and Thomas, indicating with thumb over shoulder, the doctor in the lower room, smiled the smile of mingled sympathy and contempt which the man of his class commonly bestows on the drunkard of a higher one.

'O dear!' ejaculated Elisabeth, in suppressed dismay.

''Alf seas over when I found him,' continued Thomas, 'and been a-going at his flask all the way like a good un, on account of the rain.'

Elisabeth brought the doctor up. He mounted the stairs carefully; an elderly man, his face very red, his pale blue eyes glassy and fixed. He did not

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speak much, having sufficient sense left to be afraid to do so. He stood staring at Bessie.

'Got colic, eh? colic?' he said slowly and with an effort. 'A good deal of it about. Brought you some medicine—no doubt will relieve pain.'

The room swam round him, and his attention was principally given to remaining himself a fixed point in it. With difficulty he reached the chair which Elisabeth had left by the bed, brought out his watch and took Bessie's wrist. He sat on there pretending to feel her pulse. Elisabeth and Thomas stood at the foot of the bed.

'Go away—go please!' cried Bessie, waving them away. 'I'd rather see the doctor alone.'

They went out, Elisabeth reluctantly, for she feared that the doctor was too stupefied by drink to understand Bessie's faint and broken talk. Thomas, whose heart had been cheered by several sips from Dr. Bates's flask, went down to Catharine. Elisabeth, lighting a candle-end which she found on the chimney-piece, went into the other bedroom, where Catharine's son had been used to sleep. No one had slept there since. Catharine had only kept the

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furniture because it was not worth anyone's while to buy and fetch it away. The broken crockery, the chair with the seat half out, the dim little glass and worm-eaten wash-stand, were piled on the bedstead and overlaid with dust. There was little except willow-branches to be seen from the blindless window, even by day, and now it showed only darkness, thick with soft rain, which whispered among the leaves. From the moment Elisabeth had heard Bessie's voice calling to her across the lock, she had ceased to feel her rheumatism, but now it pained her again. She sat on the bed, waiting for the doctor to come out. He seemed to be a long time, but at length he came, and she drew him into the room.

'Given her medicine,' he articulated slowly. 'Going to sleep—don't 'sturb her.'

'What's the matter with her?' Elisabeth asked. Dr. Bates fell into a portentous solemnity, and made a motion as of drinking.

'The bottle—the bottle, Ma'm. Very sad case, young female.'

Elisabeth was bewildered.

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'What bottle, sir?'

'The usu'l thing, I s'ppose, Mrs. Vyne—spir'ts—*eau de Cologne*—anything, anything. Females quite incurable—not s'much strength of mind 's us.'

'Do you mean to say as you fancy my daughter's given to drink, Dr. Bates?' asked Elisabeth indignantly. 'Why, the poor child don't so much as take a glass of ale with her meals.'

'Nat'rally annoyed, Ma'm, nat'rally. Very common thing, sorry to say—much on increase 'mong females.' He paused, swayed, and burst out with renewed solemnity, 'Drink, Mrs. Vyne, drink, is the curse this country. Many promising young man—yes, promising—mayn't b'lieve it—promising young feller, been ruined by't—sunk, sunk down, down t' this.'

He collapsed on the edge of the bed and sobbed, looking into vacancy. Perhaps he was merely maudlin; perhaps there glimmered into the depths of his poor fuddled mind a consciousness that he was making a terrible muddle of something serious, and at the same time a consciousness of hope-

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less inability to clear and bestir his drenched faculties.

'I'm afraid you're not in a fit state to attend my daughter to-night, Dr. Bates,' said Elisabeth severely.

'No, no, 'm not very well, Mrs. Vyne.' He rose, and made a great effort to control himself.

'Severe cold. Weather so very bad, Mrs. Vyne. Floods rising all day—going to be very heavy flood. Better get home at once, night so dark. Call and see your daughter t'morrow morning—hope to find her better. Good evening, good evening.'

Dr. Bates stumbled down the steep stairs, and assisted by Thomas, crossed not without danger and difficulty the lock and the meadow, to the Manor, where he had left his cart.

Elisabeth returned to the other bed-room. Bessie had drawn the blanket over her head, and whereas she had before tossed ceaselessly from one side of the bed to the other, she now lay quite still, moaning at almost regular intervals. The doctor had said she was not to be disturbed, and Elisabeth

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sat down by the fire, listening uneasily to her moans. Presently they ceased, and were succeeded by deep breathing. Otherwise there was no sound except the occasional dropping of a coal from the grate and the even whisper of the rising waters round the house. Elisabeth dropped asleep. She woke with a start, and for some reason the deep breathing and complete stillness of the figure on the bed, which had at first reassured, now alarmed her. She stole up and drew the blanket from Bessie's face. Elisabeth had little experience of illness, but it immediately struck her that the girl was not asleep, but unconscious. There was no one else in the house, except old Catharine. It was now the middle of the night. Her thoughts turned for a moment only to Dr. Bates. It would be difficult, if not impossible to get him at that hour, and in such weather. Elisabeth was patient to a fault. She did all that she could think of to rouse Bessie, and then sat down by the bed, with anguish in her heart, to wait for the day. She took a battered old prayer-book from the drawers, and read the prayers for the sick to herself

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with muttering lips; but her thoughts were not with them. They centred round the dread that Bessie was going to be taken from her. In the light of that dread she saw clearly what she had before only vaguely felt; that on the day she had gone to the Meades to tell them about Geoffrey and Bessie, a chasm had opened between her and her best-beloved child. Bessie had never loved her much since then. And suddenly it came upon her that Bessie had been justified in not doing so. She had failed to understand all that her lover had meant to the girl; she had snatched him away as one might snatch a stolen toy from a child. It would be a dreadful thing if Bessie died without being reconciled to her. Died! Why should she die? She was young and strong. Yet Elisabeth could not shake off this fear that Bessie was dying, dying now. She rose very often, and, leaning over her daughter, spoke to her; but there was no reply. At length, when several seemingly interminable hours had passed, a change came over Bessie. Her breathing was no longer audible; she lay like a waxen image on the bed, with closed

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eyes and a look of repose on her refined and sharpened features. Elisabeth could not tell what the change might mean. Presently she leaned over and spoke to her again:

'Bessie, Bessie, my love. It's Mother. Mother's here, my dear.'

There was no response, but while she still hung over the bed, Bessie's dark eyes opened slowly.

'Are you feeling better now, my dear?' asked Elisabeth.

'Yes—no—' answered Bessie, and her faint voice had a cracked, far-away sound in it. 'I think I'm going to die.'

She spoke with indifference, and closed her eyes again.

'Don't you think that, my girl,' returned Elisabeth, with enforced cheerfulness. 'You're too young and strong to die off sudden, this way.'

Bessie spoke again, indifferently as before, not moving, but turning her dull eyes on her mother.

'But it was poison what I took.'

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Elisabeth could not repress a groan.

'P'ison? O Lord! Not o' purpose, Bessie—not o' purpose?'

'Yes—I don't hardly know—I didn't care what happened to me—it was because of Geoffrey.'

Elisabeth's limbs would no longer support her. She fell on her knees by the bed, and took Bessie's hand between hands that trembled.

'The Lord forgive 'ee, my girl, the Lord forgive 'ee!'

'I couldn't go on there,' continued Bessie, her voice, indifferent as before, getting fainter. 'I might have gone away with Mr. Causton—but I'm not that sort—I couldn't—nor I couldn't stay neither. I was that miserable I didn't know what to do.'

'O pray to the Lord for forgiveness, my dear!' cried Elisabeth. 'But if you was miserable, why couldn't you come home to your own mother?'

'You'd have made me marry Percy Hicks—I know you would,' returned Bessie, a little querulous, her fingers picking at the counterpane. 'You shouldn't have taken Geoffrey away from me. I

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told you you'd kill me—but you didn't care. Why couldn't you leave me Geoffrey! You came up to London on purpose to see I didn't get him.'

'O hush, hush, my lovey! I don't know what 'ee do mean. I did never come up to London.'

'Yes—yes—that night. I wasn't certain then, but now I know 'twas you. You were set on taking him from me. Well, you've done it. There'll be no more trouble now for anyone.' Her eyelids drooped and her voice died down, murmuring something about—'they all took him away from me—took Geoffrey away.'

Elisabeth broke in passionately:

'Bessie, Bessie, my love, don't break Mother's heart! Don't cast it up agen me, my dear! I only wanted to do right. I see now as I made a mistake, and sorry enough I am—Lord knows I'm sorry. Can't 'ee forgive me, my girl? Don't 'ee think Mother loves 'ee?'

Bessie answered nothing. While Elisabeth leaned over her, her eyelids flickered and closed. Elisabeth put her face close down to her daughter's.

'Bessie,' she said, 'just speak to me once again.

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Just move a bit if 'ee hear me say I'm sorry. I'm mortal sorry, my love. It wer all a mistake. Mother didn't know. Mother always loved 'ee best—better 'n any of 'em, except Jim. Bessie! Bessie! You're never going without another word —O Lord, she don't hear what I say!' Elisabeth broke off and waited in silent anguish for some reply; but there was neither sound nor motion. Bessie breathed, but the dignity and repose of death were already upon her face. Elisabeth sank on her knees by the bed. Her hands clutched the bed-clothes, and her face was buried in them.

'O Lord, have mercy upon her poor soul! Don't let her pass and not say nothing to me. Lord, forgive her her great sin, for Christ's sake! It was my fault, it was. Lord, let her know I'm sorry before she goes!' Again she hung over Bessie in eager expectancy, and, finding no change in her, kneeled once more, wrestling in prayer that her daughter's sin might be forgiven, and that she might be reconciled to her mother before she died.

So alternately praying and watching, she passed

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the last hour of the night. Towards morning the dying girl turned on her side and breathed a long quiet sigh. Elisabeth started up, and leaned above her, feeling her hand and listening for her breath. At length she knew that Bessie was dead ; then with tears and terrible sobs she entreated the dead to return, return only for a moment, and hear Mother say she was sorry.

XXI

Thomas sat milking in the early dusk. The lantern stood beside him on the ground, and he leaned his forehead on the cow's warm side and milked mechanically, lulled almost to sleep by the rhythm of the milk falling into the pail. Suddenly he looked up, feeling that some one else was there. Elisabeth stood in the stable doorway. She came to tell him Bessie was dead.

She had also come to fetch a hand-truck on which the milk tins were sometimes taken to the town. She wanted to bring Bessie home. Bessie had wanted to go home, and she had promised to take her in the morning. Besides, the floods

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were rising, and by mid-day the ground-floor of the Round House might be under water.

At break of day they brought her home across the fields. The floods were no longer vaporously still under a grey sky. A fresh breeze bent the willows and hurried the surface of the water along in tiny crests that caught the light. An orange sunrise shot up its ragged edges half-way to the zenith, and reflected itself on the distant water in obscure yellow. The body was laid on the low truck, which was just long enough for it, and covered with a sheet. Elisabeth dragged it, and Catharine assisted with her hand on the shaft of the handle. Sometimes she looked back, sometimes peered in Elisabeth's face, with a look half sympathetic, half terrified. Yet she had a consolation which she did not mention. The winding-sheet had not been for her this time, at any rate. They were obliged to go slowly, because the truck jolted over the matted tufts of meadow grass. Thomas walked behind to steady it. Bessie's death had been so sudden that he was unable to realise it. Yet it was not according to

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his notions of decorum that such a procession as this should move unaccompanied by weeping and mourning. So even while he was bent almost double, pushing the truck, he held to his eyes a pocket-handkerchief, with which he had supplied himself before leaving the Manor; and when he stood up he sighed heavily from time to time, and made a remark or ejaculation, such as: 'Poor Bessie! Our youngest child, 'Lisabeth! Such a fine girl as that, to be took off so sudden! It's a great loss; a very heavy loss to us, I'm sure.'

When they reached the house he was surprised and pained at Elisabeth's leaving Catharine to lay out the corpse. There might have been a difficulty in getting it up the narrow stairs, and it was laid out on the table in the large parlour; the same table at which Geoffrey used to sit by the light of the smoky lamp, trying to think about his work, and irresistibly impelled to think about Bessie. When all was done, Thomas looked for Elisabeth, but her bedroom door was locked, and she did not answer when he called her. So he

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addressed Catharine, for want of any one else to address:

'I'm goin' off to town to tell her Aunt and Uncle Filkins. It'll be an awful thing for them to hear, all on a sudden, won't it? They won't 'ardly believe me when I tell 'em—but I should like 'em to see her laid out so beautiful. Then there's the Rector—and I dare say Mrs. Dangerfield, and Miss Tryphena 'ud take it as a compliment if I asked 'em to step round and see 'er.'

Catharine nodded without understanding, and he left the house in real tears and his black clothes.

After a while he returned, deeply depressed. The floods were out all round the Manor, worse than he had ever known them, and a rickety little bridge, which had long carried the farm track over a back-water, had given way. It was no wonder that Uncle Lambert had not appeared, though his usual hour was long past. Thomas looked for Elisabeth again, and found her in the kitchen. She had got the big churn there, and was working it. He sat down on a chair by the door.

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'I wonder at you, Lizzie, that I do!' he sobbed, incensed, ''aving the 'eart to make butter the very day as we've lost our youngest daughter!'

Elisabeth paused. She took her handkerchief from the dresser and wiped the sweat from her brow and the blinding tears from her eyes.

'There's no sense in letting good cream spoil,' she said.

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AN EPISODE

RATTAT-AT-RATTAT-AT.

Once more Mr. Charles fell upon the shabby door and delivered a thundering volley of knocks with the handle of his immaculate umbrella. He could hear some one moving within, but the door remained obstinately closed. Outside it was bitterly cold. Below him the narrow street, so steep it broke here and there into steps, plunged down apparently into a pit of gathering darkness, but really into the crowded centre of the little town, whose tall chimneys and huddled roofs he could still discern, distinct in the black and white of twilight and snow. The house before which he stood was the last; beyond it lay a white desolate world, whose boundary of hills could be half per-

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ceived, half divined against the sky. The snow, in some temporary thaw, had slipped down the roofs, and lay curling and hanging in long sheets and fantastic festoons over the eaves of the houses, where irregular fringes of icicles were hanging too. The street was lonely and almost dark, except for the long windows of the garrets, brightly lighted behind their lattice panes, and showing sometimes the silhouettes of looms and of figures moving behind them. As the young man stood stamping with cold and impatience in the frosty dusk, he could hear all about him the click-clack of the busy shuttles. Presently he heard the thud and clink of a heavy zinc pail deposited on the stone floor; immediately afterwards a Niagara of ice-cold and remarkably dirty water burst from under the door, dashed over his feet, and so flowed down the steps. With something between a shriek and an execration the young man jumped to one side, and almost at the same moment a voice proceeding from the crack under the door whence the flood had issued, said in a measured and stately tone—

'I beg your pardon, sir. Now I am able to see

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your boots, I perceive you are not Mrs. Joshua Higgs.'

Now the door was unbolted, and, opening a crack, showed a tall loose-jointed man over sixty, with spectacles, a bald forehead, a long shaven upper lip, and a thin grey beard. When he saw Charles he immediately flung the door wide open, exclaiming—

'Oh, Mr. Charles, my dear, pray walk in. You have had a most hungracious reception, I fear; but I am sure you will excuse me when I tell you I mistook you for my niece.'

'Is that the way you usually receive ladies, Eli Mares?' asked Mr. Charles sternly, pulling off his snow boots. Eli smiled a slow indulgent smile.

'Ladies! Oh dear me, Charles! I cannot heven imagine what I should do were a lady to honour my humble roof. But as I told you, I mistook you for a female relative.'

The narrow passage in which they stood was rendered narrower by a row of large wooden boxes placed on their sides against the wall, and con-

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verted into bookcases. The stone floor was wet, and the unprotected flame of the gas jet waved this way and that in the violent draught. It was here that Eli commonly entertained his visitors. The habit had been originally engendered by a jealous dislike of admitting strangers or indifferent persons to his sanctum, but it was now exercised mechanically.

'I suppose we must talk in the passage,' said Charles resignedly; 'but it's beastly cold.'

'Walk in, Charles, walk in, I beg!' cried Eli, opening the door of his parlour with alacrity. 'You are well aware that my little hapartment is hardly fit to receive visitors, but you are always welcome.'

Eli Mares had a precise, elaborate manner of speech. He treated his syllables with judicial impartiality, giving to each its meed of careful enunciation, and disdaining to curtail the meanest verb that is. He spoke like a man who reads more than he talks, and without a trace of his native dialect; unless the exuberance of his 'h,'

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which he inserted at every available point in his words, might be reckoned as such.

Mr. Charles entered the parlour and seated himself on the table, opening his fur coat, and showing evening dress beneath. The slim young figure, with the bright hair and clear-cut features, strikingly blond in the rich setting of the sealskin collar, brought a strange incongruous note of luxury and grace into the little parlour. Not that it was poverty-stricken, but it was bare of furniture and encumbered with books. There were books on the sofa, books on the chairs, and books innumerable on the floor; not in any disorder, but piled up regularly, one on the top of the other.

'And what does Mrs. Higgs say to you, Eli, when she does get in?' asked Charles.

'I scarcely like to repeat to an heducated man like you, Charles, what a coarse ignorant person like Mrs. Higgs is capable of saying,' returned Eli, seating himself with as much dignity as he could on a chair already occupied by two quarto volumes and several octavos; 'but since you will have it, I will tell you. She personally hinsults me,' he

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paused. 'She says'—he drew himself up and breathed rather hard—'she actually says that—that I have come to a time of life when it is my duty to make my last will and testament. Imagine it, Charles! She says this to a man like myself, in his very prime, and likely, as I frequently tell Rebecca Higgs, to outlive her and most of his relatives. Yes, she calls upon *me* to make my last will and testament.'

'I suppose she wants to secure your money for young Higgs,' replied Charles.

'No, sir; I will say for Rebecca it is mainly a sense of family duty that leads her to conduct herself thus. The Mares' hignorantly suppose it to be an offence and a disgrace to a respectable family should any member of it leave his money away from his blood relations. They are suspicious, and they suspect—they suspect me of I know not what. Oh, what will they say over my grave? Such of them, I mean, as may survive to see it.'

Eli rose, and seizing a duster, began vehemently to polish the chair on which he was sitting, as though to work off the irritation caused by the

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intolerable reflection that men, and more particularly women, of the tribe of Mares might yet live to make observations over his grave, to which he would not be in a position to reply.

'You have not given them a hint about the Institution?' said Charles, interrogatively.

Eli shook his head slowly with an air of infinite sagacity.

'You must pardon my continuing my household operations,' he said in a minute. 'One that's gone would under any circumstances be sadly shocked at the state of the room, could she return; but I should not like to think she would be positively unable to sit down without soiling her dress.'

'You could easily get some woman to do all that for you,' suggested Charles.

'Oh, no, my dear,' replied Eli promptly and emphatically.

'Why not?'

Eli smiled his slow smile, that curled up the corners of his straight-lipped mouth, and at the same time, by some law of its mechanism, drew the eyelids down almost over his eyes. It gave him a

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look of immense superiority to his interlocutor, of profound and subtle wisdom.

'She would marry me,' he said.

'I'd back you to defend yourself,' replied Charles carelessly.

Eli looked at him, smiled again, and shook his head.

'Ah, Charles,' he said solemnly, 'I have often been surprised that no one has yet married you.'

In the course of his dusting he had come to the mantelpiece. A pair of brass candlesticks stood on it, a china shepherd and shepherdess, and two faded daguerrotypes in gilt frames. In one were still visible the outlines of a boy and girl, stuck up side by side in their Sunday clothes; from the other looked forth dimly, with blurred eyes, the merest suggestion of a dark handsome Lancashire face. These daguerrotypes were all that remained to Eli Mares of wife and children, all dead within one fatal week five-and-twenty years ago.

'I am aware,' he said with a sigh, 'that this dusting takes up time which might be more profitably employed in study, but how could I

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suffer a strange and probably careless female to handle my Lairs and Penaits?' And he rubbed the faded face of his wife's portrait gently and carefully.

'I mustn't stay,' said Charles, rising. 'I just came to bring you a little contribution to your library, which I picked up in Paris.'

He handed his friend a small and beautifully bound edition of 'Don Quixote' in the original.

'Is it worthy of the Institution, Eli? I thought it pretty.'

'Pretty enough, very pretty. But you consider the outsides of books too much, Charles,' returned Eli, putting on another pair of spectacles, and minutely examining the two little volumes. 'You are ignorant of the very elements of bibliography, and would be easily imposed upon by the merest forgery. However, this appears to be genuine, so far as I can at present ascertain. Thank you very kindly, my dear. It is like your goodness to have thought of your old friend when far away in the city of pleasure.'

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'How's the Institution getting on?' asked Charles, fastening his coat.

Eli's eyes lit up. He stooped his head and spoke low, as though some one might be listening.

'The Institootion is all settled,' he said. Charles had known it settled and unsettled again twenty times in the course of the last ten years.

'It will without doubt,' continued Eli, 'take the form of an additional room to the Free Library, to be called the Mares Library. I have paced the ground behind the present building, and find it hample for the purpose. My funds are already more than sufficient to build the room, though not to pay a librarian. Oh, Mr. Charles, sir, what a lesson it will be to the people of this town when they see what a citizen, a working man like themselves, can achieve! There will be an inscription over the door in gilt letters commemorating Polly—*conjux delectissima* or *amatissima*—and me. I intend to compose it this very evening, and will bring it to you for your criticism and approval.'

'I am afraid my opinion is not worth your taking,' replied the young man.

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'No, Charles, I know very well it is not, but who is there in this town who is capable of assisting me? It is such an hunliterary place. Wykes the bookseller was telling me a fortnight ago his trade goes from bad to worse. However, as I was saying to him, it is not much wonder when he leaves that old tatterdemalion to mind the shop, with his elbows through his sleeves, and generally reading, so that he is quite unaware of a customer's presence. Give me your boots, Charles, and I will put them on for you. There! Good night, my dear, and mind you do not fall, for the steps are a mass of hice.'

So he let out Mr. Charles, and returned to the parlour. Saturday was one of the feast-days he allowed himself twice a week, when he baked a piece of meat and had in a fresh jug of beer. On other days he consumed the residue of the meat cold, and the residue of the beer flat, or even mingled with water. Sometimes on these feast-nights wild visions of luxury would float before his mind's eye. What was it like to live in a house with two or three parlours filled with bookcases,

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to keep servants, and have something different for supper every night? Perhaps he had really got enough money to do that if he pleased. The idea would be momentarily attractive, but after all there was the Institution to be considered. At supper to-night he thought of nothing but that and the inscription which was to be placed over the door. He kept a bit of paper by his plate, and wrote upon it as ideas occurred to him. *Bibliothecam hanc concivibus suis*—he began; then having got as far as *In memoriam conjugis amatissimæ*, he started again with *Fundator civis benevolus*.

So absorbed was he that a low knock at the street door passed unnoticed. At length a sharp tap aroused his attention, and muttering between annoyance and surprise, for his visitors were generally few and far between, he went out into the passage. He placed the candle on the stone floor, and lying down on his stomach, applied his eye to the crack under the door, through which he had reconnoitred Mr. Charles's extremities. He could not make out much, but it was sufficient to

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assure him that his visitor was not Mrs. Higgs; accordingly he opened the door a very little. One of the few and small gas-lamps in the streets stood beside it, so that he could see pretty plainly the meagre figure of a small elderly man, with grey unkempt locks falling from under the shapeless wideawake that shadowed his face. His elbows were through the thin coat buttoned over his chest, and the ends of his trousers were frayed. He carried five or six books under his arm.

'Mr. Mares, I think?' he said.

Eli acknowledged his identity.

'I've served you in Mr. Wykes's shop, Mr. Mares, but I dare say you don't remember me.'

Eli now recognised the man, the tatterdemalion he had blamed Wykes for keeping in his shop. He opened the door rather wider.

'I remember you perfectly, sir,' he said. 'Has Mr. Wykes sent you to me?'

'No. I came on my own account,' replied the man, with some hesitation, and paused.

'Indeed?' said Eli.

'I have noticed you in the shop, Mr. Mares.

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You were the only customer that seemed to have any taste for old books, and they tell me you're a scholar.'

'I have hacquired a few languages, sir, ancient and modern,' returned Eli, relaxing a little.

'Well, I fancy you're the only man in this cursed den of a town that's likely to value a good book two straws.'

'The people of this town *are* exceedingly ignorant and uneducated,' replied Eli, still further mollified.

'I know that. I don't want to part with my books'—he pressed his burden convulsively to his side—'But there, I suppose I must. And I thought if they'd got to go, you were the only man I'd care to bring them to.'

'Are those the books?' asked Eli, adjusting his spectacles and stretching out a hand.

'Yes. But it's precious cold out here, Mr. Mares,' returned the man with a shiver.

'Well, you may come in.'

Eli made way for him to pass, and closed the door after him. The man took off his battered

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and rusty wideawake, showing thin grey hair matted over a brow of unusual development in proportion to the small and sunken features beneath it. He leaned against a case of books, and looked on with a certain suppressed eagerness as Eli Mares turned over the volumes he had brought. They were a few old plays, and a Virgil of no particular merit. Eli peered into them, wondering how much he should offer. He did not want them, but he wished to assist the poor fellow, who had evidently come down in the world. Meantime the man turned away and began to examine the books near him.

'Ah!' he cried in a minute or two, laying his hand on a fine Boccaccio in three volumes, while his sunken eyes kindled under their shaggy brows; 'now I wonder if this is genuine!'

'Genuine!' exclaimed Eli. Then, 'I do not wonder, sir, that you are surprised at seeing so valuable a book in so exposed a position. It is a temporary arrangement, but careless, I admit.'

'May I look at it?' asked the man quickly, fidgeting with the top of it.

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'Certainly, sir,' replied Eli, with condescension. 'That book caught my eye in Paris, when our Mr. Charles took me to see the Exposition. I scarcely knew the value of it at the time, but I have since been made aware that it was a complete bargain, and, from the point of view of the book collector, perhaps the gem of the entire Instit——of my library.'

His visitor had wetted a not over-clean forefinger and was turning the pages.

'Yes,' he said, pausing. 'Yes, it *is* the Venice counterfeit. I thought so. And an uncommon clever forgery it is, to be sure.'

'Forgery!' exclaimed Eli indignantly. 'What do you mean, sir? A gentleman much better acquainted with such matters than you are likely to be, has examined my Boccaccio and highly commended it.'

'Very likely,' returned his visitor composedly. 'He didn't happen to know about the misprints in the original. Look here now, on page eight, there's *giornata*. In the real article you'd find *giornat*.

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Wrong, of course, so the Venice printer put it right, and a fool for his pains!'

Eli bent his brows on the little man, and cleared his throat several times before he trusted himself to speak.

'Do you say this Boccaccio is a forgery?' he asked at length, with the most awful slowness and solemnity.

'Oh, yes, it's the counterfeit right enough,' returned the other unabashed.

'Name your authority,' said Eli, burning with repressed scorn and indignation, but still endeavouring to be judicial.

The man sat down on the overturned zinc pail which still stood in the passage, and thought.

'It's no good,' he sighed, passing his hand through his hair; 'I can't remember. I can't—can't remember anything.'

Eli drew an audible breath up through his contracted nostrils.

'Then you must excuse my refusing to accept your statement,' he replied, triumphant but still dignified. The man shrugged his shoulders and

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answered nothing. Eli turned to the books again, composing his ruffled feelings, and considering what he should offer for them.

'If you don't want those, I have some others you might like better—Greek plays,' said the man at length. He spoke slowly, hesitatingly, as though with reluctance. 'Euripides, for instance.'

'Oh, indeed!' returned Eli with awakened interest. 'What have you got of Euripides? I should be willing to purchase a nice edition containing the *Iphigenia* (he pronounced it Hiphigenya) *in Tauride* and the *Iphigenia in*——'

'Iphigen*ia*, Iphigen*ia*!' interposed the little man irritably; 'that's the right way to pronounce it.'

Eli drew himself up.

'You, sir,' he said, 'may call it so if you please. I call it Hiphigenya.'

'It's not what I please,' returned the man rising, 'it's the right way. You're no scholar; it's easy enough to see that. Look at me—I am. I was educated at Rugby School till I was fifteen, and if my father hadn't failed and blown his brains out, I should be a great gun at Oxford by this time.

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But he was made to study books, not to sell them. So was I. And now I've got to sell them, I've got to!'

'I do not care where you were educated,' said Eli with concentrated scorn. 'You must be without common intelligence if you suppose the pronunciation of dead languages to be anything but a harbitrary convention. Scholars of different nationalities pronounce them differently. I have an undoubted right to say Hiphigenya if I choose. I shall continue to do so.'

'Oh, pray do as you please,' replied the little man with rising excitement; 'it's nothing to me. Only as long as you choose to say Hiphigenya you mustn't expect to pass as a scholar with educated men, whatever you may do in this beastly manufacturing hole. And to think that *I* am obliged to part with my books to you—to *you*! Oh, it's a queer world!'

Eli's wrath could no longer be restrained; he trembled with indignation.

'I will not continue to be insulted in my own house by a beggarly fellow like you, a tatterdemalion

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no better than a scarecrow. Begone, sir, and take your worthless books with you.'

He pushed them towards the man, who gathered them together with weak trembling fingers, and broke out fiercely in a voice that was also weak and trembling, 'You ignorant, conceited old donkey! You've missed a find; you've missed a bargain. Serve you right. Hiphigenya, indeed! Ha, ha! Ignoramus!'

This last epithet was a Parthian dart, sent through the door just as he was closing it behind him. In a moment Eli appeared outside on the doorstep. The moon was now shining brightly on the snow in the deserted street.

'What did you call me, sir?' he asked, with the same awful and judicial solemnity with which he had met the man's imputations on the character of his Boccaccio.

'Ignoramus!' called the other, going away; 'Ignoramus!' Then he went on for a bit, turned again and repeated, 'Ignoramus!' with a weak hoarse laugh.

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'Hignoramus yourself, you tatterdemalion!' shouted Eli, coming down into the street.

His antagonist, who had continued his retreat, faced about, his feeble voice strengthened by excitement.

'So you pretend to know Greek!' he cried. 'You impostor!'

Eli's dignity would hold out no longer. He bounded forward, waving his long arms threateningly. 'If tha doesna hold tha——' he began; and then breaking off abruptly, 'how dare you insult and blacken my character, you ignorant scoundrel? Begone, I say!'

'Hark at him!' shrieked the little man mockingly; 'why, he can't even pronounce English properly!'

The neighbours, hearing the loud angry voices in the silent street, looked out of their windows. The moon was shining straight up the street, showing the meagre little figure of the ragged scholar dark against the snow. He stood facing his adversary, his elbows pressing his books

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against his sides, the cold night wind blowing about his thin garments. Much further up the figure of Eli presented itself to the astonished gaze of his neighbours, who had seldom or never before seen him leave his house after he had returned from his day's work at the mill. It stood or rather danced there long and lean, and behind it a black shadow, immeasurably longer and leaner, danced too in grotesque gigantic mimicry of his gesticulations.

'You insolent vagabond!' he shouted, striding forward again. 'If you don't be off I'll give you such a lesson.'

'I've given you a lesson anyhow, and gratis too,' interrupted the other, backing a little as Eli advanced. 'You won't forget to say Iphigenia next time.'

'I shall adhere to my own pronunciation, sir,' returned Eli fiercely.

'No, no; you'll say Iphigenia—for my sake, do.'

'Hiphigenya!' yelled Eli, 'Hiphigenya! Hiphigenya! There!' he yelled in a *crescendo*

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and at every word advanced a stride nearer to his foe.

The little man retreated hastily till he reached the turn of the street where it broke into steps, and narrowing, plunged down out of the moonlight into black shadow. There, as though struck by a sudden thought, he turned, and shifting all his books under one arm stretched out the other, pointed a trembling finger at Eli, and began to laugh. It was a thin, ghostly cackle of a laugh, but somehow he contrived to put into it a whole world of scorn and derision. It was too much for Eli.

'If tha doesna hold tha domned noise,' he roared, bounding forward, 'a'll gi' tha the biggest hidin'——'

The rest was lost in the rush of his onset. In a moment he had grasped his adversary by the shoulders and was shaking him violently backwards and forwards as a nurse shakes a naughty child. The poor creature was indeed hardly stronger than a child, and when Eli loosed him he fell down two steps and lay there with his

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books scattered all round him. Eli, ashamed of his own violence, picked him up in silence, set him on his feet, brushed the snow from his clothes, and restored his books to him without saying a word. The little man took them, also without a word, turned, and went hurrying and stumbling down the steep ice-coated steps. The gulf of darkness swallowed him, while Eli paused panting—for he was not accustomed to exertion—at the top of the steps, and listened to the sound of his enemy's retreat. The footsteps ceased, and for a minute all was silence; then once more a ghostly cackle of laughter ascended to the listener's ears, and a thin voice from somewhere far away down there in the darkness reiterated—

'Ignoramus! Ignoramus! Ignoramus!'

The next morning being Sunday, Eli Mares was walking through the town in company with Mr. Charles, whom he had accidentally met. He carried a large paper bag in his hand, for he was going as usual to renew the flowers on his wife's grave, although the bitter frost must certainly in a

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few hours destroy the white narcissus and purple violets which he purposed to lay there. The two friends were walking through a small street, and a squalid one compared to most of those in the prosperous little manufacturing town. Eli, with his hand on Mr. Charles's arm, was eagerly reciting the different versions of his Latin inscription, and asking Mr. Charles's opinion, chiefly as it appeared for the pleasure of having some one with whom to differ. Presently they came to a little crowd collected round an open door, by which a policeman stood on guard. The people all looked grave—even agitated—and talked to each other in hushed voices.

'What's the matter?' asked Mr. Charles.

A wrinkled old woman with a shawl over her head turned round and caught him by the arm.

'Eh, dear, Charles!' she cried, 'it's shocking, that it is!'

'What is it?' he asked again.

'Why, lad, there's a mon clemmed—clemmed to death i' the night i' that poor moithering woman Shaw's garret.'

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'Ay, mester, that's it,' said a respectably dressed man, 'a poor chap dead of cold and hunger at our doors, as you may say.'

'Eh, that's bad!' ejaculated Eli Mares.

'Terrible!' exclaimed Charles. 'Do you know who he is?'

'A Londoner, a'm thinking,' answered another, 'a mon that used to sit i' the beuk shop up yonder, in Westgate Street.'

Eli went suddenly pale and clutched hold of Mr. Charles.

'Mr. Charles, sir,' he whispered, 'I must go in—there's some mistake here, I'm sure.'

'Why on earth should you go in, Eli?' asked Charles, a little pettishly.

'Oh, my dear, do not inquire; but I must, indeed I must. I shall know no peace till I have ascertained the facts.'

The policeman allowed them to pass, telling them they would find no one in the house except the doctor and Mrs. Shaw, to whom it belonged. The garret was easily found, for the ladder leading to it was immediately at the head of the stairs, and

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Charles climbed up, followed more slowly by Eli. It was a small garret, which had formerly held Shaw's loom. Several broken panes in the window were plastered over with newspaper, but there had been no pretence of mending the skylight, which also had a broken pane. A large wooden bedstead almost filled the garret, which had no other furniture except a cracked jug and basin, and a rough deal box. On the bed, with the knees drawn up and the head, with its grey dishevelled hair, thrown back upon the bolster, lay the emaciated body of a man, turning up to the white sky above a face lined and wizened, not so much with years as with misery and bitter revolt.

'Do you know what he died of, doctor?' asked Eli abruptly. 'I suppose it might be heart disease —or a stroke?'

'I'm afraid there's no need to suppose either,' answered the doctor; 'just look at the poor creature —he's a mere skeleton. Besides, he had nothing on but a shirt and his wretched coat and trousers, and you see what the bed's like.'

There was nothing on it but an old, coloured,

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cotton tablecloth which the doctor had drawn off the body. Nothing except five or six books which the man seemed to have dropped beside him when he lay down. Eli knew the look of them but too well.

'It was the coldest night we have had for thirty years,' resumed the doctor. 'There is no doubt the poor fellow was starved to death.'

'Well, but he was in Wykes's shop,' argued Eli. 'He must have been earning a wage.'

'Not above a few shillings a week, sir, when he was in work,' interposed Mrs. Shaw, who was standing by the doctor with her apron to her eyes, 'and Mr. Wykes he dismissed the poor gentleman a fortnight ago. He said as times were bad, and the customers had complained of him.'

Mrs. Shaw was a south-countrywoman of the helpless widow type.

'Did you know he was in a state of destitution?' asked the doctor.

'Lor', sir, I've enough to do to think of myself and the children,' returned Mrs. Shaw, with a fresh burst of tears. 'My lodger, he mostly locked his

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door when he went out. He paid the rent reg'lar till last Saturday, but I've said to him times and times, "Why hever don't you sell them rubbishing books and get yourself something a bit comfortable?" He never would try till yesterday evening, and then he went out to sell some of 'em, but I don't know if he did, for we were in bed when he came home.'

'Couldn't get anything for them, no doubt, poor fellow,' said the doctor, taking up a volume and glancing at it.

'There's a lot more in the box, sir,' said Mrs. Shaw.

The doctor turned to go, telling her to come downstairs with him. They were already both on the ladder when Eli called out—

'Stop, sir; stop, ma'am! It is my wish to pay this unfortunate person's rent. Also the funeral expenses.'

Mrs. Shaw's voice was heard below in profuse thanks, and the doctor, whose legs only had as yet disappeared, paused.

'Very kind, sir, I'm sure. But won't you

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look at the books? They may be worth a few shillings.'

Charles opened the deal box. It was full of books, and he began to turn them over, while Eli remained standing with his back towards him. Presently Charles made an exclamation.

'Do come here, Eli!'

Eli turned a woe-begone countenance on him and slowly approached.

'Just look at that,' said Charles excitedly, thrusting two faded but beautifully bound octavo volumes into his hands. It was an Aldine Euripides, dated 1503. Eli looked at the title-page languidly, and handed it back.

'Yes,' he said, 'it is hundoubtedly worth some money.'

'There are several good Delphins here,' Charles resumed, placing the books carefully on the floor. 'If the poor fellow had only known!'

Eli made no reply, and Charles continued his researches.

'There's hardly a book that's not good of its kind,' he observed after a while. 'By Jove, here's

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Pine's Horace! I wonder where the fellow picked them up. He can't have known their value or he would have sold them. Probably that born fool Wykes refused to make him an offer. What an awful pity he didn't bring them to you or me, Eli. Well, it's a very sad business, but the poor thing's gone beyond our help now. These books of his will pay his landlady over and over again and bury him handsomely. You must buy them for the Institution, Eli; they'll make a beautiful shelf all by themselves.'

He was holding out the Horace to Eli, who took it mechanically, but did not look at it. There was a pause, then Eli thrust it back upon the young man.

'Don't,' he said, in a smothered voice, 'don't, sir.'

Then clasping his hands on the wooden ball that terminated the bed-post, he bowed his face on them and cried with an exceeding bitter cry:

'Lad, lad, tha doesna know. A'm a bad-hearted mon, a bad-hearted, onmerciful mon, is

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what a am. Eh, dear! Eh, dear! What 'ud she say if she were here to see it?'

Mr. Charles rose and laid his hand on Eli's shoulder.

'My dear old boy,' he said, 'do tell me what is the matter.'

Eli controlled himself by an effort and stood up.

'Charles, my dear, I will endeavour to tell you. He did come to me. He brought me those books yonder,' pointing to the bed, 'yesterday evening. It was bitter cold, and I kept him standing on my doorstep. You yourself have often complained of the cold there, and so did he last night. Think, my dear, I had a warm fire and a good supper in my parlour, and I never asked this poor starving fellow-creature in to share it. No, I let him freeze in the passage; because I am well-clad and not sensitive to cold myself, I gave no thought to his sensations. I might have saved him—I sent him naked and hungry away, and, now, there he lies.' Eli's hard, grey cheeks were wet with tears, and his voice trembled.

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'But he didn't tell you he was in want, did he, Eli?' Mr. Charles rather affirmed than asked.

'No, sir. He brought a few books for sale, among the least valuable, as it now appears, in his collection. I did not want them, but I saw he was in bad circumstances, and I was about to purchase them, when he offended my pride, my miserable pride and vanity, and instead I drove him from me with angry words—I might almost say with blows.'

'Probably the poor fellow was rough and embittered by misery,' said Charles. 'You couldn't tell he was starving.'

'I ought to have observed his miserable looks,' returned Eli. 'As you say, the unfortunate creature was doubtless irritable through starvation, and having received a better education than most persons of his class, he was anxious to show it off. He made some ill-judged remarks on my books, and presoomed to correct my pronunciation according to some conventional rule he had been taught.'

'And you naturally——' Mr. Charles began.

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'Oh, do not talk of naturally!' Eli broke in. 'You wouldn't feel it natural yourself, Charles, if you had driven a fellow-creature out to die. Yes, I drove him away—I hinsulted his rags and wounded his feelings. I even perhaps deprived him of the only consolation he had left to him—his confidence in his own learning. And it is too late now to make amends'—he approached nearer to the dead man with his hands clasped—'it is too late now to confess my fault and ask his forgiveness.'

Charles laid his hand on Eli's shoulder, and the two friends stood so for a minute, side by side, looking at the wasted remnant of mortality upon the bed. Then the elder sighed deeply, and drawing a large handkerchief from his pocket, slowly wiped away the traces of his tears.

'I should like to do something for him, my dear,' he said; 'it is poor work only giving money. Do you put away the books and I will arrange things a bit decently.'

Charles turned away while Eli composed the dead man's limbs and crossed his hands upon his breast. Then he went to his large paper bag

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which he had placed on the floor by the book-box. He lifted it, and paused as though irresolute. At length he took out the violets and the great bunch of white narcissus from the South, and laid them gently on the breast of the dead; and in spite of the coldness of the atmosphere, the little garret was filled with a fragrance sweeter than that of the old 'spikenard very precious.'

'Please to take my purse, Charles,' he said, holding it out, 'and pay for everything that is required, including a gratooity to the poor woman. I must go now.'

'Very well, Eli. I will arrange for you to have the books.'

'No, sir, no!' cried Eli vehemently. 'I cannot take them.'

'It will be the best thing that can happen to them,' urged Charles. 'They will be public property when they are in the Institution—and think what an addition they will be to it.'

For a moment the temptation was terrible. Eli stood irresolute, fixing hungry eyes on the box full of books with the Aldine Euripides con-

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spicuous on the top. But turning away with an effort—

'No, Charles,' he repeated firmly, 'I will not take them.'

When he was half-way down the ladder he paused.

'Take them yourself, sir,' he cried with an heroic effort. 'Found a Hinstitootion yourself, Charles, and place them in it.'

The sacrifice was completed. He disappeared.

Eli continued his interrupted walk, mechanically carrying his empty paper bag. He soon reached the open country, where the white roads were hard and clean under foot. The sun had come out and glittered on the frosted hedges and the crystals of the snow; the sky overhead looked singularly high and blue. He turned into the cemetery and made his way with some difficulty, stumbling over concealed mounds and crashing into snow-drifts, to a grave in a far corner. At first he could not see the tin cross that always lay there, but disinterring it at length, he removed the snow

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and the withered flowers with which it was filled, and replaced it on the mound. He stood looking at the empty cross, empty for the first time for so many years, and again the tears rose to his eyes. In spite of the deep snow he sat down on the grave, laid his forehead on the low headstone, and embracing it in his arms, sobbed aloud.

'A didna mean to do it, Polly,' he whispered; 'eh, Polly, tha knows a didna.'

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PRISON BARS

It was a long, an interminable street in a city of dreams. Its perspective of lamps stretched away before her, converging to some point infinitely remote in a strange murky kind of night; but there were no lights in the windows and no one in the street except herself. In her dream she was tired and seemed already to have come a long way, but she was obliged to keep hurrying, hurrying on, looking for Elsa's lover, and weary and perplexed because she could not find him. At last, quite suddenly, he appeared, standing by a lamp-post. She could not see his face, but she knew it was he. She laid her hand on his arm—she could feel the rough texture of his sleeve—and, in that confusion of mind which is part of a dream, cried out joyously, 'Elsa! Elsa! I've found your lover.'

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But the young man was suddenly not the same. He laughed, and the laugh said to her quite distinctly, 'Not Elsa's lover, but your own.' Then he turned and, catching her in his arms, kissed her on the mouth with a long kiss. She woke and sat up on her pallet. She saw the prison cell by a narrow ray of moonlight that fell through the high barred window across the bare floor. The consciousness of facts returned to her, but they did not occupy her attention; it was entirely arrested by the strange sensation of that kiss, which seemed to be still warm upon her lips. What could possibly have made her dream such a thing? She, who in all the two-and-thirty years of her life had never felt a lover's kiss, even upon her hand; though if kisses were jewels it would have sparkled more than any queen's with the kisses of grateful friends and dependents. To these might have been added, had she chosen, the kisses of literary admirers, for Marie Dehio's songs were sung wherever people dared to sing them. But Marie was shy, and avoided admirers. She was plain, without the tact of instinctive women, and with a vivid

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realisation of the world's beauty and many-coloured brightness that made her see herself as a kind of dull gray patch in the midst of it. As she sat on the edge of her bed, with the white ray of moonlight slanting across her knees, she looked back on her life as dying people do; for practically it was over. If ever she came out of prison, it would be as an aged and broken woman. And as she thought of it all, it seemed to her very hard and bitter that she must go down to her grave without having known that sweet and moving experience of love which falls to the lot of so many. Presently she heard in the profound silence of the prison, a faint measured tapping on the bars of the window next to her own. She understood it. It said:

'Are you Elsa Belaieff?'

After a moment's hesitation she pushed her wooden stool to the window, climbed up and tapped an affirmative.

'Sergius Karatchenko is on the other side of you,' came back from the unknown neighbour.

Now Sergius Karatchenko was Elsa's lover. For some time after this Marie stood still, wonder-

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ing whether he knew that Elsa was really safe. Then she tapped:

'Sergius, do you know who I am?'

'Elsa,' came the reply. 'You were trapped at Number 10. So was I. Poor little Elsa! It was a bad exchange for a lovers' meeting.'

At this moment the creaking boots of the sentry were heard, as he came slowly along the corridor and peeped through the Judas-holes in the doors as he walked. Marie jumped down hastily from her post at the window, and no one spoke till the steps had passed and sounded faintly again in the distance. Then her other neighbour tapped softly, advising her to be silent for the present, as a new Governor had lately come to the prison who was endeavouring to put in force the rules against conversation. Especially was he severe in his punishment of those who were found talking at night.

The following day Sergius tapped on the window-bars, 'Dearest love,' 'My heart's treasure,' and other expressions of the kind.

Marie leaned her forehead against the cold wall

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of her cell and blushed. She felt almost as though she were acting treacherously towards Elsa in allowing Sergius to address her like this. She made no reply, but listened to the other prisoners. They were all talking to their neighbours, and even if they did hear, no one would betray her.

'It is not Elsa,' she answered at length. 'She is safe, or will be so in a few days. She had a telegram to say little Sergius had scarlet fever. She is going back to Paris the usual way. I went to meet you and explain; they knew somehow she was expected and took me for her. I am Marie Dehio.'

'Say again who you are,' was the reply.

Marie was surprised. Sergius knew quite well she had been with Elsa. Besides it was so strange that he should not say he was glad Elsa was safe or express any anxiety about the child. She repeated her name.

'You are the poetess,' came back.

Marie was still more surprised.

'Yes, of course,' she replied, 'Elsa's Marie—little Sergius's Mariechen.'

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'I know you quite well, though I have never seen you,' he returned.

This was bewildering. Marie thought with a little shiver that some people went mad in prison.

'Dear Sergius,' she replied, 'have you forgotten? We have been friends for ten years.'

There was a pause; then a very hurried tapping.

'I am not Sergius. He also was unable to go to the *rendezvous*. Same mistake as with you. Don't ask my name.'

Marie did not know what to say, and presently he went on.

'I have learnt your songs by heart.'

'They are all I can contribute to help the cause,' she answered. 'I have no talent for practical politics.'

'I did not mean your political songs. They are fine, but I like your love-songs best.'

'I don't care for those myself,' she returned, and sighed.

'But I care for them very much,' replied the pretended Sergius. 'There is a real woman's heart

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in them, and that is a thing worth knowing, whether in poetry or in life.'

Marie sighed again. She certainly had a real woman's heart, but no one had ever thought it worth knowing.

'I think myself fortunate to meet you, even in this way,' her neighbour went on.

'You would be disappointed if you met me really,' she tapped back impulsively.

'You are too modest. You knew the Stepanoffs in Paris?'

'Yes, very well.'

'I knew them in Switzerland. They had a photograph of you with Elsa Belaieff's little boy. They took it with them wherever they went. They said you were an angel, and I could well believe it.'

Marie blushed, this time with pleasure. She remembered the photograph perfectly. It had been taken some years ago, when little Sergius was quite a baby. He had been naughty, and would not sit still unless Mariechen held his hand. So she had been taken holding his hand, thinking only of him, and smiling in the sunshine of the child's sweet

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unconscious flattery. Many people said the likeness was flattering, but that was because they had never seen Marie Dehio in her happiest moments. 'The poor Stepanoffs were so grateful for little kindnesses,' she said.

'Do you call it a little kindness to nurse two people through typhoid fever and keep them from starvation?'

'It would have been a great deal for a poor or busy woman to do, but I had nothing else to do, and at that time I was rich. My estate has been confiscated since.'

'Yes, because instead of living in luxury, you gave everything, even the clothes off your back, to your poor exiled countrymen.'

'That is an exaggeration. Besides I had nothing to spend my money upon. I have no tastes, and I am too shy and——' she stopped; she did not like to say 'unattractive,' so she said 'stupid to care about society. I only gave what I did not want.'

Here Marie's other neighbour addressed a remark to her, the man on the other side of the

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supposed Sergius joined in, and the conversation became more general.

Somehow—whether that news from their comrades in the outer world made its way by some unknown channel to the prisoners, or that the mutual confession of the neighbours had been overheard, is uncertain—but somehow their fellow prisoners soon became aware that it was not Elsa Belaieff and Sergius Karatchenko who occupied those two cells, but Marie Dehio and Alexis Michailoff, a man well known both to the authorities and his comrades for his daring courage and subtle intelligence. The police would be glad if they should discover whom it was they had thus accidentally captured.

Night after night Marie Dehio and Alexis Michailoff talked together. At first they also talked to their other neighbours as much as politeness demanded, but gradually they almost completely forgot them; for Marie and Alexis became lovers. In the world it would have been thought incredible, ridiculous that two people who had never seen each other's faces or heard each other's voices should be lovers. In the prison it did

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not appear so strange, since the prisoners were accustomed to making friends in the same manner; but it seemed interesting and touching. Such a thing had never happened before. Even the gaoler, although he pretended to know nothing about the matter, became a kind of accomplice. Marie had the same charm for him that she had for all persons of humble station. Once Alexis contrived to ask him, as though in jest, what he thought of Marie's appearance. He answered in all honesty that she was not pretty—few ladies looked pretty when they had been in prison for a month or so—but then her voice was sweet, and she had a face you could not help loving. She longed to make some similar inquiry about Alexis, yet would not for the world have done so. Sometimes, when she considered how near she and her lover were to each other, yet how implacably, perhaps eternally, separated, her heart was heavy; but at other times the consciousness that she loved and was beloved again, more than contented her. Long hours passed quickly while she sat perfectly motionless, absorbed in a beautiful world of Might-have-been,

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through which she and Alexis wandered, always together. So in a few weeks, even in a few days, she lived in her prison cell years of delightful life.

It became known to the prisoners that the authorities had discovered the real identity of the pretended Elsa and the false Sergius. To Marie this was of no personal consequence; she had indeed been quite prepared to confess her deception, as Elsa must by this time be safe across the frontier, and she herself would gain rather than lose by the discovery of the mistake. But for Alexis she trembled. His offences were greater and more recent than those of Sergius, and his punishment was sure to be severe. He might even be sentenced to death, an ignominious death upon the gallows. Marie fretted herself quite ill with anxiety over her lover's possible fate, though she cheered him with brave words at the window.

One morning the gaoler told her that she and Alexis were both to be brought before the Commission for examination. He added, as though carelessly, that she would go first and Alexis next, and that they would most likely pass each other

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in the corridor. Marie was silent. Then she asked the gaoler if he would lend her a looking-glass, as she would like to make herself as tidy as possible before her examination. He brought her a dim and battered little mirror. When she was alone she took it up, and went into the best light she could get. She had heard that Love was a great beautifier, and she hoped she might find it so. She raised the glass and held it before her face; and as she held it there it shook, for her hands trembled with a growing anguish. Love the Beautifier had forgotten her, or rather he had not been strong enough to contend with the dark powers of the prison. The face that looked out on her from the dim unhandsome mirror had in these few weeks grown much older than her years. It was haggard and pale with a dead unlovely pallor, and her eyes were red with the tears she had shed for Alexis's sake. She put the glass down slowly and seated herself on the bed. She sat there motionless, just as she had often sat there before wrapped in happy dreams, but this time her stillness was the stillness of despair.

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Presently there were voices in the passage. She jumped up, brushed her thick short hair hastily, without looking in the glass, and tried to find a pin to fasten her dress where a button had been lost. Before she had found one the key turned in the lock and the gaoler came in, accompanied by two warders, to bring her before the Commission.

No one had ever appeared more calm and collected before the dreaded tribunal. It was not these men that Marie Dehio feared to meet. Fortunately for her, she had little either to tell or to conceal. She had come to Russia this summer on private business, and although she had several friends implicated in the conspiracy which the police were endeavouring to track out, she herself had no definite knowledge of it.

It was when she re-entered the long corridor with its row of locked doors, and saw the gaoler standing beside one of them, the one next her own, that her courage failed her. Her longing to see Alexis was swallowed up in her fear of being seen by him; seen thus for the first time, gray

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in the gray shadow of the prison. As she drew nearer, the gaoler, with a friendly furtive smile, fitted the key in the lock of Alexis's door. She shook with agitation and could scarcely refrain from rushing past, before he could open it, to the safe refuge of her own cell. Yet shame compelled her to walk on between her two warders at the same pace as before. The gaoler put his back against the door and leaned against it till it opened, not wide, but wide enough to show a man standing just within. A little man with a crop of unshorn dark hair and a dark eager handsome face. It was Alexis. Towards that eager face Marie turned a face deadly pale and with eyes that implored pity and forgiveness for its involuntary offence against her lover and yet more against her own love. It was but a moment that it lasted, that mutual look, and she was alone in her cell once more, listening to the footsteps of Alexis and his warders dying away along the corridor. Then her agitation calmed itself, and she was able to think of him as she had seen him. He looked just the brilliant adventurous fellow he was, and

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though good-looking enough to satisfy her imagination, he was neither so young nor so handsome that there was any essential incongruity in her regarding him as her lover. She thought of all the vows which he, like another Pyramus, had made through the 'envious wall,' of all his protestations that to him she must be beautiful, whatever she might appear to others; and she chid herself for having doubted, however momentarily, the faith of her Alexis. She heard him return to his cell, and almost wished the friendly gaoler had left her door ajar.

That day he made no sign. Perhaps the result of his examination before the Commission was such that he had not the courage to tell Marie about it.

Next morning Marie broke the silence. Her other neighbour answered her, but not Alexis. Later in the day she spoke to him by name, yet he made no reply. Once or twice on the following day she spoke to him timidly. Alexis's cell might have been empty or he dead for all the answer that ever came to her.

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When this silence had lasted several days, Marie began to think by what means she could kill herself. This was not easily done in the prison, yet nothing else remained for her to do. It was not only that her heart was bleeding from the cruel blow Alexis had dealt it; it was the shame, the coarse comedy of the thing that made it impossible for her to live. Marie had seen enough of the world to know how such a story as this would appeal to its sense of humour. The deception of the man who had made love to the unseen woman, and found her withered and ugly, would be pleasant enough to it; but still more amusing would be the humiliation of the woman who, being withered and ugly, had dared to love and fancy herself beloved. Alexis himself, when he returned among his comrades, would no doubt be the first to make a jest of the whole matter, if only to protect himself from ridicule. While her love-story had lasted she had been too absorbed in it to realise the existence of any other creature under the moon except herself and Alexis. Now she looked back on it, she observed that it had

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been noticed, kindly indeed, but noticed by the neighbours. The sequel would be so too. She fancied them laughing quietly in their cells. No, there was nothing left for her to do but to creep into the last, the only secure hiding-place.

Some former occupant of the cell had loosened a board in the floor, beneath which he had doubtless concealed some very dear possession. Marie used it for putting away part of her food; not all, because if she had fainted from starvation she would have been taken to the Infirmary. It was December and outside the long nights were bitterly cold, but in the prison the atmosphere was warm, heavy, and damp. So, though she spent them lying almost uncovered on the floor, she did not immediately become ill. Only in a little time, which seemed to her a very long time, she grew weak and feverish, and had a sharp pain in her chest when she breathed. When the gaoler came she sat up and tried to speak in a strong voice, but he observed that she looked ill. He wished to call the doctor, but she implored him piteously to leave her alone, and he yielded, for he said to himself:

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'Ah, poor lady! She has a trouble at heart, and the doctor cannot cure that.' The gaoler was sure that something had gone wrong between the lovers.

The weather became exceptionally cold, even for that season, and one night the warming apparatus went wrong. The temperature of the cells dropped to freezing point, and loud complaints and cries for the gaoler were heard on every side. Marie could not help being glad of this accident. It shortened the road along which she had to travel. She lay down that night hoping she would be dead before daylight. But this was not so. The gaoler found her next morning lying huddled on the floor, beside her bed, unconscious but not dead, and he had her taken to the Infirmary. She had been too ill to replace the loose board the evening before, and, seeing what was hidden beneath it, he understood that she had been trying to starve herself to death. He told all his prisoners about it, particularly Alexis. Alexis was by no means hard-hearted, and he felt sorrow and remorse; yet after all, he told himself, he had tried to pursue

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the course which would occasion least pain and annoyance in the long run.

In the Infirmary Marie's was pronounced to be a very bad case of double pneumonia. When she regained consciousness she talked in a rambling way to people who were not there. She said a thousand tender and charming things to Alexis, such as before she had said to him only in her dreams. Then again she would partly remember, and beg him to forgive her and be friends, for she quite understood what he felt and would never bring the matter up against him, not even in her thoughts —if only he would be friends. But more often she talked to Elsa's little Sergius. Once she took a woman who was sitting by her side for Elsa, and, hiding her head in the stranger's bosom, told in a few words her strange, sad little love-story. Then suddenly lifting her head, she seized the imaginary Elsa by the arms, and looking in her face cried: 'You won't laugh at me, Elsa, will you?'

On the following day she died.

This woman who had sat by the bedside was herself a prisoner, and it happened that she went back

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to her cell on the day of Marie's death. She communicated to her neighbours what had passed in the Infirmary. By putting things together, the prisoners had already got a pretty clear notion of how the little romance which had interested them all so much, had come to its premature end; and no one had laughed. Perhaps in prison one loses one's sense of humour. When they had heard the rest of the story, they were still less humorously inclined. Alexis remained in the prison for more than a month before he was condemned to the gold-mines of Kara. During the whole of that time not one of his comrades held any communication with him. He never understood the reason; nor would he have understood it if he had been told.

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MISS BRIGHT-EYES AND MR. QUEER

Admiring stars,
Youth cried, 'Nor Jove nor Mars!
Mine be some figured flame, that blends, transcends them all!'

It was the twelfth waltz, and the band had already struck up; yet the great hall of Wareham College was empty, save for a row of weary chaperons yawning on the side benches. The dancers were but just beginning to return, crowding the ancient stone staircase, under its gray monastic vaultings, with lithe young shapes and fresh young faces of men and maidens. Down, right against the stream, came a tall gaunt young man. He might have been just as tall and just as gaunt without exciting any remark. Perhaps it was his upright shock of blond hair, or something in his eager crooked face, as he

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peered this way and that through his eye-glass, that caused it; anyhow more than one girl said to her partner, as he towered over them, on an upper step, or slipped past to a lower one: 'What a queer-looking man!' The reply was, 'Oh! he's not a Wareham man.' And this generally seemed to the partner enough to say on the subject.

He made his way down with difficulty, stopping once to investigate a lurking couple, half hidden in an extemporised bower of palms. At length he came out from under the low, wide archway, and paused on the semicircular flight of steps leading into the quadrangle. He stood there a moment looking up into the sky. It was pale, yet blue, and endlessly deep, and the stars in it shone palely too, as they looked down on the red and green oil-lamps and the swinging Chinese lanterns that lit the gray battlements and wide gravelled space below. They seemed to the young man to be looking at him—looking reproachfully, as who should say, 'What, comrade! You have really forsaken us for these bedizened night-lights?' And he half turned away towards the gardens,

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darkly visible beyond the illuminated iron railings. Then holding his programme up to his eyes, though he could not possibly see what was written there, he answered the stars or his own thoughts. 'If it were anyone else I really would; but you see it's Miss Bright-eyes.'

The night was as warm as a June night can be. Spite of the music calling, calling to them from the distance, there were still a number of couples seated in the quadrangle. It was furnished with arm-chairs, rugs and sofas from the men's rooms, and looked like a large disorganised drawing-room. In the corner of one of these sofas, with a row of Chinese lanterns swinging over her head, sat a girl. She was very young and very pretty, but with more charm than appraisable beauty. A young man was sitting close by her on a low chair. He was, perhaps, five years older than the girl, which gave him a right to advise her, and he was doing so.

'You'd much better cut him,' he was saying. 'If he didn't write down his name it's his own fault,'

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'I will if he doesn't come to fetch me. I can't if he does,' said she.

'Oh, yes, you can. You can pretend it was a mistake afterwards. You really must learn to defend yourself. I don't know who the fellow is —he's not a Wareham man—but he looks like a German waiter and dances like an owl.'

Now this young man was almost indistinguishable from other young men, which was perhaps why he did injustice to queer people.

'Hush!' said she. 'He's coming.'

'Cut him!' he muttered.

Meantime the long lean man with the upright fair hair, which certainly was a little like a German waiter's, had been peering through his eye-glass at couple after couple in the quadrangle, till he came to this particular couple under the Chinese lanterns.

'This is our dance, I think,' he said, just like anyone else.

The girl rose, murmuring something polite.

'Excuse me, sir,' interposed the man on the chair. 'But I think you're mistaken. It's mine.'

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At this barefaced falsehood she started so much that she dropped her handkerchief and programme. The two men simultaneously stooped for them, but so quick was the tall man, that in spite of his height and of his rival's advantageous position on the chair, he secured them. He held the programme up to a Chinese lantern on a level with his head. She stretched out her hand for it with a little shriek.

'Oh, yes: you are quite right,' she said. 'It is your dance.' But the tall young man looked at the programme before he handed it back to her. Then she took his arm, and they walked in silence across the quadrangle towards the hall. She was silent because she was wondering whether anyone could possibly look at waltz number twelve on her programme and not observe written opposite it with a black pencil, in a round schoolgirlish hand, the name 'Mr. Queer,' and after it two notes of exclamation, also schoolgirlish. When they were halfway up the stairs he fixed his glass more firmly in his eye and said—

'The Master didn't mention my name when he

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introduced me, because he didn't know it. But you've given me one which does very well.'

'He didn't know my name either,' she replied. 'I dare say you've called me something stupid, too.'

'My name for you is also not without merit,' he answered gravely.

'Miss Pale-green or Miss Cat's-eyes, I suppose,' she suggested.

'Cat's-eyes?' he repeated, surprised. 'Oh, no! It was nicer. I called you Miss Bright-eyes.'

'I wasn't talking about eyes,' she returned with asperity. 'I meant my necklace. I thought you might have noticed it, because it's uncommon.' And she fingered it.

'No, I didn't notice it,' he answered, giving his serious attention to the necklace. 'Is that what you call the things? How on earth was I to know?'

They danced once round the room and stopped near the door.

'I can't dance, as you see,' he said, quite unapologetically. 'I shouldn't like to if I could. It's idiotic. Come away; don't let's look at them.'

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He turned towards the staircase. Miss Bright-eyes loved dancing, and certainly Mr. Queer could not dance; yet she was glad she had not cut him. He had a manner that made his most ordinary remarks appear original and his most extraordinary ones usual.

'Why do you come to balls, then? Are you obliged?' she asked with a laugh that rang prettily in the vaulted roof of the staircase.

'No,' he replied, quite unmoved by her mirth, 'but I am fond of seclusion.'

'I see. So you mortify your affection for it?'

'Not at all. Balls are secluded. Everyone is too taken up minding his own and his partner's business to care anything about yours. That's a world as it should be. Besides, I like ball-room conversation.'

'Do you?' she asked. 'I am so glad you told me in time. Don't you think this floor's uncommonly good? How awfully hot it is to-night! Are you going to the Masonic on Wednesday?'—and so on and so on, till they reached the foot of the stairs.

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Mr. Queer made no answer, and she did not wait for one.

'Thank you,' he said, when she had done, 'that will do.' And he led her away towards the gardens.

Miss Bright-eyes was glad he went that way, for she supposed the other young man, dimly visible across the quadrangle, still in the same chair, to be sulking and watching for her and Mr. Queer. He was really smoking a surreptitious cigarette and considering his debts.

After a pause, during which they walked along an alley of clipped limes, bordered with coloured lamps, Mr. Queer said—

'Ball-room conversation approaches frankness; it's almost genuine. That's why I like it. You sometimes meet a real person at a ball; at other parties you meet only bad imitations. Everyone's playing a part, and it's all the worse for being one of his own invention.'

'They say it's people's nature to act,' returned she.

'I don't complain of that: what I object to is

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that they do it so badly. Don't you think society would be pleasanter if people dropped nature and were natural?'

'I think it would be amusing for half an hour —or twenty minutes.'

'I suppose you've been to see "The Palace of Truth;" but there, if I recollect, the stupid people were truthful about each other. Now, I only propose that we should be truthful about ourselves.'

'Ah! one has to be so clever to be that,' said she.

'Well, we are,' said he.

'Good gracious!' She glanced up at the leafy roof overhead, pale green in the lamplight. 'Are we in the Palace of Truth?'

At the end of the alley there was a kind of bower. Here a huge transparent block of ice rose out of ferns and ivy, and a lamp had been so placed that the ice itself appeared to give out a pale light. On each side of the ice stood a chair.

'No; it is there,' he answered, pointing to the two chairs. 'You needn't sit down in it unless you like. We'll go on talking about the temperature—though

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I'm absolutely indifferent to it; and about the floor—though you know I hate dancing—if you prefer to do so. But it seems to me we shall miss a little experience and a unique opportunity for that charming thing, a perfectly discreet indiscretion. We don't know each other's names, and I propose to put it in the bond that we don't ask. I leave England to-morrow morning, and I assure you we are not likely to meet again while we are recognisable. Will you sit down in my Palace of Truth for a quarter of an hour?'

'Are we going to talk about you or about me?' she asked. 'Because it makes a difference.'

'About both. I propose that you should ask me three questions about myself, which I shall be bound to answer truthfully, and I will then ask you three about yourself!'

'Am I obliged to answer?'

'You may ask once for the question to be changed. I also reserve to myself some discretion. For instance, I decline to be asked for my experiences of bump-suppers; whether I have ever been proctorised; how much paint I have kicked

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off the College gates at the witching hour, or any other trivialities of that kind. Won't you play my game? It seems to me new, and possibly diverting.'

Miss Bright-eyes made no reply, and they walked on in silence for a few yards. So they had reached the end of the alley and the block of ice. Here she suddenly slipped her hand out of Mr. Queer's arm, seated herself in one of the chairs, and waved him to the other.

'Mr. Queer,' she said, leaning forward. 'What made you so queer?'

She looked like a young witch of the Brocken, all pale in the pale light that glittered on her smile and her eyes, and on the cat's-eyes and diamonds round her little white throat.

Mr. Queer was delighted.

'An excellent question!' he exclaimed. 'I might say I was born so, but that would be begging it. My genealogy is mixed: it ranges from a Scotch professor to a Viennese *danseuse*. I was brought up on the Continent till I was too old to be crushed out of my shape, even under the iron heel of Master Grundy; yet I was comfortable

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enough at school and I've enjoyed myself immensely at Oxford. A man, even an Englishman, may be as queer as he likes provided he's got good brains and a good temper. I have.'

'What sort of clever are you, and what part do you mean to play in the world? This sounds like two questions, but it's really one.'

'You're right. If one could be sure what sort of clever one was, the other question would be settled. I am hesitating between two careers. I have some literary talent; on the other hand, I have particular qualifications for diplomacy. Luckily I have time and means to make up my mind at leisure. But one thing I do intend'—he leaned forward and spoke with animation—'and that is that my name—the name you aren't to ask, you know—shall be heard in the world some day. People who have blundered pretend you can't get both happiness and success out of life. I mean to show them you can. I mean first to be successful, then to make myself happy by marrying a charming woman, suited to my career, whatever that may be.'

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'But sha'n't you fall in love?' asked Miss Bright-eyes. 'Oh, dear! what a stupid question! I didn't mean it for one—it doesn't count.'

'You can't withdraw; it's against the rules. Yes, I hope I shall, little and often. To be a little in love adds to the interest of life; to be much destroys it.'

There was a pause.

'Now it's my turn,' said Mr. Queer. 'I think—excuse me if I'm wrong—I think you can be only just making your *début* in society. At this crisis—it must be one to a girl—what encourages you most? The consciousness of cleverness or the consciousness of beauty?'

'Neither, Mr. Queer. The consciousness of clothes from Paquin.'

'Oh! Woman—! But I've no time to exclaim. I repeat your own question. What sort of clever are you, and what do you intend to do in life?'

'Like you, I am between two bundles of hay. I have a remarkable musical talent; it is probable, if I gave myself up to it, that I should be in the first rank as an *artiste*. But then I should

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have to sacrifice everything, including an enchanting papa, who would be wretched without me. Sometimes I love music so much I make up my mind to do it; then the world and the domestic devil are too much with me, and I change my mind. No; on the whole I think I have decided to be a great social success, and ten years hence to marry some man who is not a bore.'

'Meantime, don't you want some one to be in love with you?'

'Some one! Heaps of people. Just enough to add to the interest of their lives, you know, and not enough to destroy the comfort of mine. This lamp's going out.'

'It's of no consequence. Your eyes at this moment would light the entire avenue!'

'Mr. Queer, that is not in the bond. We were to tell the truth about ourselves, not about each other.' She rose. 'The next's a supper dance,' she said.

Other people were now walking in the alley. Presently these two were ascending the stone staircase with a slowly ascending crowd.

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'It's awfully hot, isn't it?' remarked Mr. Queer. 'But the floor's not half bad. Thanks; I'm so sorry I'm not to have the pleasure of meeting you again.'

And he handed Miss Bright-eyes over to her expectant partner.

It was October, and this year autumn had come early. Down below there the tall poplars burned like spires of gold; the pointed steeple, the scarlet roofs and great square dark wooden dormers of the little town showed clear-cut and brilliant in the sunshine against the blue of the lake. Farther away, a diaphanous veil seemed drawn across the feet of the mountains, melting their misty blue into the more intense colour of the water. Farther still, high, high up in the purple sky, a sharp touch of silver snow gleamed through the autumnal atmosphere. You saw it all so from the little terrace of the hotel, overhanging the abrupt hillside. There the chestnut-trees had already strewn most of their leaves, and the air was full of the incessant tinkle of bells, as the cows

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cropped the grass in the green meadows below, where the sprinkled fruit-trees wore their last frail splendour of colour, such as the lightest breeze must soon scatter abroad. A woman sat on the terrace. She leaned her arms on the stone balustrade, and looked out on the rich and beautiful world with joyless eyes. Presently she ceased to look; she bowed her forehead on her hands, and sighed as if from her heart. A man was sitting not far off, behind some bushes, but she had not observed him. He wore a light-coloured wide-awake and gold spectacles, and with his long fair beard and hair sprinkled with grey, he looked like an Englishman's idea of a German professor. He was sitting in a wheeled wicker chair, and was arranging some photographs in a book; but he saw the woman all the same, and, his eye being keenly observant, marked the profound discouragement in every line of her figure. Now he thought that no one had a right to be discouraged. He was not. He had sat next her at the *table d'hôte* and found her very agreeable, with the habit of society; besides, her music last

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night had given him pleasure. So he wheeled his chair, which he could move himself, though with difficulty, out from behind the bushes, and came along the terrace. The rustle of the fallen chestnut-leaves, the crunch of the gravel under the wheels, roused her. She came towards him.

'Let me wheel your chair for you,' she said. 'Where shall I put it?'

He thanked her.

'It doesn't matter. Here by this table would be best. I've been hunting you down with my photographs. I dare say you forget how much you want to see them; but I don't.'

She put his chair on one side of a small table under the chestnut-trees, and seated herself on the other. She was not sorry, if she was hardly glad, to be taken away from her own sombre and aimless thoughts. He was his own photographer, and regarded his works with enthusiastic interest. Indeed, his choice of views showed him to have the eye of an artist. She looked through the large book from the very beginning, and commented with taste and discretion.

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'Where is this?' she asked, coming to one which had been recently stuck in and had no inscription under it.

'Oxford—the Botanical Gardens. I spotted that view twenty years ago, before I took to photography, and I went back to do it this summer. Here are some more of Oxford. Have you ever been there?'

'Once, ages ago. Something like your twenty years, I'm afraid.'

'These are bits from Wareham Gardens. That one's a success, I flatter myself, with the cedar in the foreground and Magdalen tower in the distance. This one of the clipped alley is not. I knew it wouldn't be. You see, these rows of little lamps and Chinese lanterns make it so spotty; yet it was partly on account of them that I took the photograph. The last night I spent in Oxford, before I went down for good, I was at a ball at Wareham, and the walk was illuminated just so. It was only a concert they had on last summer, but the decorations were the same. I can't tell you how strange it seemed to come back and find the place exactly as I'd left it. I almost expected to find

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my last partner waiting for me at the end of the alley, like that *armes vergessenes Kind* of Heine's, who sits centuries long at the window in the old-world German town. Only, not having the imagination of the poet, I fail to picture any young lady wasting her time in that appalling way on my account.'

'Oddly enough, my recollections of Wareham are exactly like yours. I went to a ball there—perhaps it was the same—I know it was one of my first balls, and I thought the whole thing "simply ripping," though I don't suppose I said so. I remember that clipped alley very well. There was a great block of ice at the end——'

'Ah, yes; that ice! My last partner and I sat down on each side of it and talked of ourselves with all the frankness of which youth is capable; which is perhaps not saying much. We each sketched out our little plan of life. Oh! it was nothing sentimental, I assure you; not love in a cottage or anything of that kind. Perhaps, if it had been, it would have afforded our guardian imps less amusement. I've often thought of it since. She was going to be a great social success,

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and in ten years' time to marry a man who wasn't to be a bore. Poor little dear! I dare say she married some portentous prig before she was one-and-twenty, and has been having her moral tone raised ever since.'

'Oh, no, Mr. Queer; it's not so bad as all that. Nobody has ever done that to her.'

'Miss Bright-eyes!—Yes, yes, I see now. What an idiot I was not to see it before!'

'Ah, bah! Twenty years! Besides, even then, we heard more than we saw of each other.'

There was a silence, and she slowly swept to the ground two of the large yellow five-fingered leaves of the chestnut which were lying on the table. When she looked at him again there was a dewy softness in her eyes.

'Mr. Queer,' she said gently, 'I—I'm so sorry——'

He finished her sentence for her.

'It ended like this? So am I—sometimes.'

There was another pause.

'We were not more than average wise, twenty years ago, were we?' he asked.

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'Oh, complete donkeys!' she answered, with a gleam of laughter.

'It goes without saying that I thought myself a deal cleverer than I was. But after all I was right in expecting to get more out of life than most men do. I did. First I got my expectations; then I got something I hadn't expected. Even now I don't think I get less than the average successful man. He is tied to the wheel of a profession, and whirled round and round in the same place till his brains are addled. People call that getting on.'

'You have so much courage!' she said. 'I have not—at least, not now. Yet my misfortune is nothing to yours.'

'Isn't it? I doubt that. I believe you're bored. I suppose, in the days of the Inquisition, people—clever People!—pitied the man who was burned alive, and told the poor wretch with the water drip-dropping on his skull it was nothing.'

'I see you understand,' she said. 'Ten years ago I had a misfortune people understand. We had a good deal of money, and we lost it all.

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If it had happened ten years before that it would have been a good thing for me. I should have studied hard and become a real musician. As it is, I'm quite a successful music-mistress. Since my father—who was my great friend—died, I've kept my mother and myself without much difficulty. At first it was a bit of a struggle; but the struggle kept one alive and happy, because it was, on the whole, successful. Now I've got as far as I shall ever get with my music. I'm no longer young; and—yes, it's true—life does seem rather flat and unprofitable.'

'Am I allowed to ask why Miss Bright-eyes didn't marry? They can't all have been bores.'

'Certainly not. I don't pretend to have been the one woman in a thousand who is genuinely bored by a lover; but I was mortally afraid of being the one in twenty who is profoundly bored by a husband. After all, single boredom is only a vacuum; married boredom is solid, intensely solid. No, Mr. Queer; perhaps if I had had a romance I shouldn't tell you about it, but upon my honour, I've had none. I've never been in love. I used to

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be proud of that: but now, somehow, it seems to me a little dreary.'

Mr. Queer stroked his long beard, and looked out over the lake and away to the mountains with a curious smile.

'I knew I'd had better luck than you,' he said. 'I was in love for five years. I'm told I wasted all that time despising everything I could do and trying to do everything I couldn't. Myself, I really hardly know, and certainly don't care, what I did those five years. I know I lived. By Jove, how I did live! When the crash came, I went out hunting. I always was ridiculous on horseback. I'm quite sure I'd no definite idea in my mind when I started; in fact, I wasn't conscious of having a mind at all. Well, no matter. But as I felt myself shoot over the beast's head in the direction of the stone wall, I did distinctly hope I was being launched into Eternity. I wasn't, you see; only into this chair. Now don't be so sorry for me, Miss Bright-eyes. I'm not in the least bored.'

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